

## On Inculturation and Context: Making the Faith Relevant in the Postmodern Setting

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Postmodernism is the current trend of the world. This phenomenon has indeed shaken the basic concepts of the world. The many-faceted ideas of postmodernism represent a pressing challenge to the Church in general as she considers to be a credible witness to the world in her given social milieu. This study then analyzes the need for Inculturation as the Church's response to the contentions raised by postmodernism. With Inculturation as the methodology for theologizing, the Church will not only thrive in this postmodern world. Inculturation will also help the church be ever more relevant to humanity despite the threat of relativism, deconstructionism and varying interpretations of reality.

### 1. Postmodernism and Inculturation

The tenets of postmodernism have been the catalyst of major changes in the way people do theology. "Theology as an academic discipline has undergone major changes in response to a shift from a modern to a postmodern view of ultimate reality."<sup>1</sup> For so long, the Church has emphasized and valued uniformity, universality and objectivity. However, postmodernism and its contours are questioning the very foundations that made the Church who she is today. Anticipating the birth of postmodernism, Nietzsche famously stated, "What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people."<sup>2</sup>

"The old ideal of scholastic thinking is a perennial philosophy, something which never changes essentially and is true forever."<sup>3</sup> The church used to do theology along this line. For the sake of uniformity and universality, a kind of scholastic theology was imposed, something which never changes and is true forever. Anything that deviates from what Roman Catholicism espouses is not only considered false but also heretic. Theology was then seen as transcendental without any reference to the historical, cultural and political aspects of human beings. The church and her doctrines were considered a meta-narrative, a grand story which is purported to provide the explanation for all the phenomena in the world. Postmodernists however "doubt the role of meta-narrative, a 'master story' that serves as a comprehensive explanatory framework for everything else, narratives which subordinate, organize and account for other narratives."<sup>4</sup>

Truth was eternal and unchanging. The church safeguards these eternal truths revealed by God and prevent them from being corrupted. Perennial theology was used to confer to these truths a philosophical grounding. This theology "identified the universe and all within it as a closed system that followed a clear set of rules and ultimately was predictable. Hence, ultimate reality or God was understood to be a closed system, immutable and unchanging (monolithic model)."<sup>5</sup> However, "postmodernism identifies ultimate reality as an open system that changes, adapts and even evolves according to varying socio-cultural and historical contexts (multilithic model). Ultimate reality like any living entity then is mutable and this has profound implications for the way in which we comprehend religious diversity."<sup>6</sup> There was a "shift in the center of gravity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Craig, *A Post-modern Theological Model for Understanding the Religious Concept of Ultimate Reality and Religious Diversity* (Australian Catholic University), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche* (ed. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1974), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Craig, *A Post-modern Theological Model for Understanding the Religious Concept of Ultimate Reality and Religious*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Christian faith from the West to the non-Western world.”<sup>7</sup> “This shift is from modernism’s monolithic view or model of ultimate reality to post-modernism’s multi-lithic view or model of ultimate reality.”<sup>8</sup>

The questions now are: How does the Church communicate her truth in a world that challenges her capacity to know and even to communicate the truth? How does the Church make herself relevant in the everyday life of people given a decentered and pluralistic view of reality? These are the questions that the Church needs to answer as they challenge not only the basic assumptions of the church but also her missionary relevance to people.

How does the Church respond to the critiques of postmodernism? How does she make faith flourish given the challenges of postmodernism? Grenz writes,

First, Christians should welcome the demise of foundationalism and the postmodern critique of Enlightenment epistemology, especially the efforts to rethink the nature of rationality. A chastened rationality is advent in the loss of the metanarrative. Second, Christians must reject the rejection of the metanarrative, for the gospel is a particular narrative that has universal significance as the unifying center to reality. Third, Christians must embody a gospel that is more communitarian and less individualistic, more integrating and less rationalistic, more holistic and less dualistic, and more concerned with the relevance of faith for every dimension of life than simply understanding faith as assent to orthodox propositions.<sup>9</sup>

The Church must affirm both the universality and locality of the theological enterprise. A perennial theology, which is seen as unchanging, is now archaic with the growing recognition that the Church and her way of doing theology are affected by the changes in the world. The acceptance of plurality in terms of culture, perspectives, and worldview has had a direct impact in theologizing. A one general theology which is true for all would not suffice given the diverse interpretations of reality. Therefore, “a theological framework that is sensitive to the postmodern context is necessary in order to help the church extend the message of the gospel in a contextually appropriate manner.”<sup>10</sup>

Inculturation, as the new method of doing theology, offers new insights with regard to the communication of truth in a postmodern background. Its recognition of the plurality of contexts and experiences gives way to the growth of varied theological reflections which seek to express the truths in different philosophical and cultural framework. It does not seek to relativize everything as what postmodernists have proposed. Rather its main orientation is to embrace the little narratives as legitimate sources of theology. Its goal is to incarnate revelation in the given social milieu human beings find themselves treading on. Therefore, the subsequent part of this chapter will discuss how Inculturation follows a non-foundationalist theology that is built on postmodern standards.

### 1.1 The Quest for a Nonfoundationalist Theology

“In the modern era, the pursuit of knowledge was deeply influenced by Enlightenment foundationalism.”<sup>11</sup> The rationalists under the banner of reason sought to discover an epistemology that will provide human beings with an absolute, universal and irrefutable claim regarding the certainty of their beliefs. According the modern philosophers, the “acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Knowledge must be built upon a sure foundation.”<sup>12</sup> This stable foundation of knowledge must be unassailable, discernable, and universal to any rational human being that transcends the particularity of context, experience and culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Kirsteen Kim, *Missiology as Global Conversation of Contextual Theologies* (Malaysia: IAMS), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Craig, *A Post-modern Theological Model for Understanding the Religious Concept of Ultimate Reality and Religions*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993); in Mark Medley, *An Evangelical Theology for a Postmodern Age*: Stanley J. Grenz’s Current Theological Project, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Josephine Braun, *Towards a Contextual Theology of Community: An Exploration of the Body of Christ Metaphor* (Ontario: McMaster Divinity College, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> John Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*(Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, PA), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p12.

In the same manner, “this foundationalist conception of knowledge came to dominate the discipline of theology as theologians reshaped their construals of the Christian faith in accordance with its dictates.”<sup>13</sup> Theologians fabricated theology on the foundation of irrefutable religious truths and doctrines which also transcend the particularity of context, experience and culture. Hence, particular expressions of faith were neglected and even considered superstitions.

In the postmodern context, however, “foundationalism is in dramatic retreat, as its assertions about the objectivity, certainty and universality of knowledge have come under withering critique.”<sup>14</sup> Postmodern thought rejects the absolute foundation of knowledge which was purported to be discernable to every person regardless of particularities. The modern project of assigning to reason transcendental and universal features fell short. A modern foundationalism “with its emphasis on the objectivity, universality, and absolute certainty of knowledge, is an impossible dream for finite human beings whose outlooks are always limited and shaped by the particular circumstances in which they emerge.”<sup>15</sup>

This deep-seated critique of postmodernism to reason had a direct impact on theology. Can finite human beings who are bound to certain situations and worldviews know infinite and universal precepts about God?

Many Christian theologians and thinkers have come to view postmodernity “primarily as a threat to Christian faith.”<sup>16</sup> With its emphasis to relativism and subjectivism, postmodern thoughts were considered antithetical to the absolute truth espoused by the Church. However, the identification of postmodernism as another brand of relativism, nihilism, and subjectivism is not conclusive enough to capture the actual breadth of the phenomenon. Franke writes,

Broadly speaking the term postmodern implies the rejection of certain central features of the modern project, such as its quest for certain, objective and universal knowledge, along with its dualism and its assumption of the inherent goodness of knowledge. Clearly, postmodernism cannot be dismissed as nothing more than a deconstructive agenda that stands in stark opposition to Christian faith and thought. In fact, there is much evidence that suggests that the postmodern context has actually been responsible for the renewal of theology as an intellectual discipline after a period of stagnation under the weight of modernist demands concerning the acquisition of knowledge. Freed from the constraints of modernity, postmodern concerns have spawned numerous new theological programs.<sup>17</sup>

Postmodernists bring new insights to the way people have been doing theology. “They reject the notion that among the many beliefs that make up a particular theology, there must be a single irrefutable foundation that is immune to criticism and provides the certain basis upon which all other assertions are founded.”<sup>18</sup> They argue that there is no one way of doing theology. The universal and classical way of doing theology is not anymore relevant to answer the demands of this postmodern world. Following the postmodern view on culture, humans are in no way passive recipients of the truth from God. Theology must in a way be cognizant of the fact the pluralism even in the expressions of faith is a characteristic that must be considered in theology. A general and comprehensive kind of theology would hinder people from genuinely expressing their faith. “Non-foundationalist theology does not eschew convictions, it simply maintains that such convictions, even the most longstanding and dear, are subject to critical scrutiny and therefore potentially to revision, reconstruction, or even rejection.”<sup>19</sup>

A non-foundationalist approach to theology seeks to respond positively and appropriately to the context where the human belongs, expressed in their cultural situatedness. Culture and context should play a major role in the Inculturation process. They must never be taken for granted in the theological enterprise. To give importance to these two concepts would affirm the paper’s stance on the need for Inculturation as the Church’s answer to postmodern critique. Hence, these two terms must be discussed in detail.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

## 1.2 Culture and Context

Culture is primarily involved in people's world construction and identity formation. It "includes the symbols that provide the shared meanings by which we understand ourselves, pinpoint our deepest aspirations and longings, and construct the worlds we inhabit. And through the symbols of our culture we express and communicate these central aspects of life to each other, while struggling together to determine the meaning of the very symbols we employ in this process."<sup>20</sup>

"To be human is to be embedded in culture and to participate in the process of interpretation and the creation of meaning as we reflect on and internalize the cultural symbols that we share with others in numerous conversations that shape our ever-shifting contexts."<sup>21</sup> It "is the big umbrella which includes religion, politics, language, economy, kinship and other aspects which affect a group of people."<sup>22</sup> It has three levels: the physical, social and ideational. "The physical is the surface level, e.g. clothes. The second level is the level of purpose, usage and meaning. The deepest level of culture is the ideational. This is the level of the basic assumptions, of values and drives. It is the level of the people's psychology. This is the level that tells what is useful, true and valuable."<sup>23</sup>

The ideational level reveals the deep seated beliefs of people. In a way, it is the core of their identity. How people look at reality is defined and conditioned by the ideational level. This is the level collectively shared by a group of people as they make sense of whatever is available in their own context. Below is an example of how pervasive the culture (ideational level) is in the lives of people.

Mercado writes,

To preach the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32) encounters difficulties in Papua New Guinea. The difficult part is about the prodigal son working with pigs. Since the Semitic people consider the pigs as the dirtiest animal, to take care of them means to do the lowest kind of work. So Jesus meant that the prodigal son went to the bottom of the social ladder. The prodigal son was so hungry that he even wanted to eat the food of the pigs. That means he was even lower than the status of a pig. However, for the people of Papua New Guinea, pigs are very important. They treasure pigs because —pigs are used for the bride price and for paying big debts. —The pig is so much valued that it even sleeps with the women. One can see pictures of women breastfeeding their babies on one side and the pig sucking the other breast. So taking care of pigs is a prestigious work.<sup>24</sup>

If someone were to preach this parable to people in Papua New Guinea, they would think that the prodigal son is actually doing a noble task. He will not be considered prodigal at all. There is really a problem here with the intended meaning on one hand and the perceived meaning on the other hand.

Theology, if it wants to make itself relevant to people, must touch the ideational level. It must be congenial to people's most cherished beliefs or else it will be perceived as something foreign even oppressive. Religious colonialism happens when the church "not only spread the faith but also imposed a kind of official expression of the faith."<sup>25</sup>

Liturgy, as one of the official expressions of the faith, valued uniformity of practices. Regardless of the place and time, the norms attached to the Liturgy must be followed. "Thus we were told to genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament and to stand during the gospel of the Mass. The history of the liturgy shows that genuflection as a sign of respect goes back to the knights of the Middle Ages. However, in Papua New Guinea the people of the highlands sit down when their leaders speak. This sitting position is a sign of respect."<sup>26</sup> Should the people of Papua New Guinea stand during the reading of the gospel for the sake of uniformity of practices even if it is a sign of disrespect for them?

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Leonardo Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Hence revelation and faith must be presented in such a way that it takes into consideration what people value and hold dear. This is how Jesus preached and this how people should be preaching. “Since Jesus knew his audience and their culture, his hearers understood well the message. His examples, which were taken from the Jewish culture, went home.”<sup>27</sup>

Jesus Christ as a real person lived, acted and thought like a Jew. “His being a Jew has challenged other nationalities through the centuries to make him alive, so to speak, in their cultural way of following Christ.”<sup>28</sup> This chapter argues that culture must therefore never be taken for granted when doing theology. “The rift between the gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times just as it had been in other eras.”<sup>29</sup> Inculturation recognizes the fact that human beings do not interpret the world from a neutral point-of-view. “Theology is always done from a certain perspective within a particular context.”<sup>30</sup>

Even classical theology and its claim of transcendence were bound to a certain particular experience. No theology is born out of nowhere. Every theological reflection originates from a certain cultural framework and social pattern. “Are the words of Christ in the gospel not colored by the evangelist’s preoccupation of the local community to which he belongs?”<sup>31</sup> Preaching Jesus Christ has always been inculturated. “In other words, preaching Jesus Christ as the Good News is not culture free because it has always the cultural bias of the preacher.”<sup>32</sup>

“Culture has its own signs and expressions.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, a certain kind pluralism in religious reflection and practices is not only legitimate but desirable. Theologizing must be the marriage of both culture and faith. Through this faith acquires a human face and culture is given a divine dimension. Pope John Paul II writes, “The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith. A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.”<sup>34</sup>

Without exaggeration, Inculturation is one of the most decorated achievements of the church in this contemporary world. Its recognition of context is what separates it from the classical way of doing theology. The next parts will discuss the background, concepts and methods at play in inculturating theology. The study hopes that through doing this, the readers will have a fuller understanding of this phenomenon and how it answers postmodern critique.

## 2. Classical Theology

“Jesus is the decisive and definitive salvation from God to all people. This faith conviction of the apostles, born after reflection on their total experience with Jesus, is the starting point of all Christian Theology.”<sup>35</sup> The apostles, having been commissioned by Christ himself to preach to the farthest corner of the world, communicated their experience of God to other people. They wanted to give an account of their faith, and formulated writings which were now collectively called as The New Testament.

In the following centuries later, Christianity spread all over the Roman Empire despite the threat of persecution. After Constantine the Great signed the Edict of Milan, making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, the spread of Christianity became inevitable. More and more people coming from various backgrounds were converted to Christianity. This was a problem the Church will soon face. Converted Christians realize that their new-found faith uses symbols and terminologies which they are not familiar with. Theology soon became a filter for human experience, and experiences and values which run contrary to the teachings of the Church are removed even destroyed.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the Modern World* (Vatican City, 1975), no. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Philosophy*, p. 4

<sup>32</sup> Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology*, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> L’ Osservatore Romano, June 28, 1982, pp. 1-8.

<sup>35</sup> Jose De Mesa and Lode Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2005), p. 7.

“Since the Middle Ages and the beginning of Scholasticism, theology has been regarded as a scholarly, academic discipline.”<sup>36</sup> Theologizing is done inside universities and seminaries, and its participants are learned individuals well versed with the scriptures and raised by divine tradition. Ordinary people, at that time, were seen as passive recipients of perennial truths. Theologizing was an exclusive property and theology was understood as a finished product.

“Renaissance marks a revolution in human understanding of the world. The religious worldview crumbled through the growing scientific, rational explanation of the surrounding world reality.”<sup>37</sup> The Renaissance marked a new understanding of reality apart from any religious claim. “While theology used only philosophy before as its handmaid; that is no longer true at present.”<sup>38</sup> As new findings about the world are being discovered, as modern philosophical thoughts and other human sciences emerge and as technology challenges the limits of human potentials, faith now begins to collapse. Consequently, the Church saw how this change affected the lives of faithful believers and challenge them to be hostile to these changes. “The Syllabus of Errors of Pius IX (1864) and the decree *Lamentabili* of the Holy Office (1907) against Modernism during the reign of Pius X are perhaps the most eloquent witnesses to this Dark Age for Catholic Theology.”<sup>39</sup>

Despite the Church’s initial reaction to block progress, the world admittedly, has not ceased to change and progress. The logical thing would be to accept and adapt to these changes since change is a force to be reckoned with. But the church has shown stubborn resistance and remained indifferent to the changes in the world. Theology became detached from reality and has superficially touch people’s lives.

“Theology today is in crisis. Divorced from the actual realities of life, it has been criticized as irrelevant and therefore meaningless.”<sup>40</sup> Theology must offer concrete answers to concrete problems experienced by human beings in their own social milieu. “It has to be reborn at the grassroots level, in the midst of life and lived-experiences of people.”<sup>41</sup> Hence, Inculturation is not done out of fancy or caprice but rather is a theological imperative. This chapter argues that Inculturation is vital in this postmodern era.

### 3. Inculturation as a Theological Imperative

Inculturation is a theological method that seeks to understand the Christian Faith in relation to a particular context. As the postmodern world poses a great challenge to the Faith, it then becomes a theological imperative. It is only in the light of Inculturation can this Faith become meaningful to different people having diverse backgrounds and beliefs.

Inculturation is perceived as something fresh but at the same time traditional. On one hand, this kind of theology seeks to give the Christian Faith a new footing. On the other hand, it represents the traditional methodology that was used in writing the Scriptures. “Doing theology is ultimately the interpretation of experience. This is how the Scriptures came to be written; this is how the doctrinal tradition was formed; this is how theologians theologize today. Theology has always been done this way. What contextual theologizing proposes is to recognize this in a conscious and deliberate way.”<sup>42</sup>

It tries to express the same truth via new images familiar to people. “A contextual approach to theology is in many ways a radical departure from the notion of traditional theology, but at the same time it is very much in continuity with it. To understand theology as contextual is to assert something both new and traditional.”<sup>43</sup> It “accents an awareness of the contextual nature of human knowledge and mandates a critical

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<sup>36</sup> Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Manila: Logos Publication Inc., 2003), p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology*, p. vii.

<sup>39</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Bevans, “Contextual Theology,” in *New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Southwest Liturgical Conference, 2010)

<sup>43</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 3.

awareness of the role of culture and social location in the process of theological interpretation and construction.”<sup>44</sup>

### 3.1 Inculturation as Traditional

Doing theology contextually is radically new. It is a unique departure from traditional theology which becomes relatively insignificant in this postmodern time. “While we can say that doing theology by taking culture and social change into account is a departure from the traditional or classical way of doing theology, a study of the history of theology will reveal that every authentic theology has been very much rooted in a particular context in some explicit or real way.”<sup>45</sup>

The Bible, being a collection of books, tells stories about significant people or group of people written under different times which reflect different concerns. The Old Testament books delve with varying histories of people whose stories were influenced by the underlying factors of their time. Even the Gospel accounts were written to address specific contexts. Each gospel was written by the evangelists in varying styles, tones, audiences, messages and emphasis depending on the context they were written. These glaring examples point only to one thing; that scriptures defended through tradition are highly inculturated hence must remain inculturated. “What becomes clear is that even a cursory glance at the history of theology reveals there has never been a genuine theology that was articulated in an ivory tower, with no reference to or dependence on the events, the thought forms, or the culture of its particular place and time.”<sup>46</sup> “There is no such thing as theology; there is only contextual theology.”<sup>47</sup> Franke writes,

The expression of Christian thought has taken shape and has been revised in the context of numerous social and historical settings. It has also developed in the process of navigating a number of significant cultural transitions: from an initially Hebraic setting to the Hellenistic world; from the thought-forms of Greco-Roman culture to those of Franco-Germanic; from the world of medieval feudalism to the Renaissance; from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment; and from the developed world to the third world. Currently, theology is grappling with the challenges raised by the transition from a modern to a postmodern cultural milieu. Throughout this ongoing history Christian theology has been shaped by the thought forms and conceptual tools of numerous cultural settings and has shown itself to be remarkably adaptable in its task of assisting the church in extending and establishing the message of the gospel in a wide variety of contexts.<sup>48</sup>

Inculturation is traditional. It is not a new approach to theology as it dates back to the time of Jesus and his apostles. However, it lost its place in the theological scene as the emphasis of theology moved from Inculturation to mere transposition of faith and revelation from one historical time to another. This is the reason why a growing clamor to go back to the original approach to theology is being done.

### 3.2 Inculturation as Radically New

Inculturation is perceived as a new way of doing theology not because it is entirely new but because it is a break away from the traditional way of doing theology. Classical Theology conceived theology as a kind of objective science of faith. “It was understood as a reflection in faith on two theological sources of scripture and tradition, the content of which has not and will never be changed, and is above culture and historically conditioned expression”<sup>49</sup> This kind of theology is considered immutable and unchangeable; the truth of which it carries cannot be corroded over time.

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<sup>44</sup> Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>45</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, pp. 3-4.

The purported essence of Classical Theology lies in the reality that God became man, and by becoming man, has expressed the fullness of revelation to the Israelites, the chosen people. The tradition and experience of the Israelites, as a people, became the measuring stick to which other cultures and traditions must adhere to. The experiences of the chosen people are deemed permeating and indissoluble that the Faith must always be interpreted according to their own standards and norms.

However, what makes Inculturation completely new is its recognition of another valid source of faith: present human experience. Theology should be “done as an attempt to confess and bear witness to the truth of the Christian faith in and for particular times and places.”<sup>50</sup> The possibility of valid communication of truth is now recognized every time God, as a communicative agent, encounters persons or cultures in their finitude and limitations. “Theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression.”<sup>51</sup> If not, “theology may have a hard time in explaining the relationship of supernatural truths to people’s ordinary experiences and their day-to-day search for a meaningful life or for a society which is worth of human beings.”<sup>52</sup>

Inculturation offers three valid sources of theology: scripture, tradition and present human experience-context.<sup>53</sup> Present experience becomes the third valid source for theology since postmodern understanding of the world is characterized by subjectivism. While Classical Theology understood theology as something objective hence metaphysical, theology that is inculturated perceives theology as evidently subjective hence personal. “By subjective, however, it does not necessarily mean relative or private or anything like that but the fact that human experience and human society, socially and historically bound as it is, is the source of reality.”<sup>54</sup>

In doing Inculturation, these three poles interact with one another. “If the pole of the Judeo-Christian tradition alone is stressed, then the result will be a form of religious colonialism.”<sup>55</sup> If the pole of human experience is stressed, the result would be the relativism of faith. Contextual theology aims to find the middle ground for the three poles to engage in dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect and acceptance.

Admittedly classical theology suppressed and neglected the pole of human experience to the point of absolutizing revealed truths in the scripture and tradition. “Classical theology is so concerned about a body of eternal truths that it almost makes it appear that God at a certain moment dictated supernatural information, faithfully written down by the biblical authors and infallibly captured in the technical language of theology. To be a person of faith, one need only give an intellectual assent to those truths revealed by God.”<sup>56</sup>

In addition, the human world of meaning within a particular and historical situation is, as it were, left out. Human experience, which is a constitutive element of every theological reflection, is virtually neglected. Consequently, “statements of truth, formulated in another time and place, are transported into a different cultural and historical situation.”<sup>57</sup> Classical theology certainly had its merit then. It helped the church survived the upheavals brought by modernism. However, it is not anymore relevant and culturally meaningful. The study argues that the church needs a new way of theologizing.

Reality is not prefabricated. It was not sent from up above. “Reality is not just ‘out there’; reality is mediated by meaning, a meaning that we give it in the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms.”<sup>58</sup> Human beings do not interpret the world from a neutral perspective. Each one has preconceived ideas of reality inherited from the culture in which one is imbedded into.

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<sup>50</sup>Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 23.

<sup>51</sup>Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup>Stephen Bevans in his book, *Models of Contextual Theology*, formulated six models of Inculturation/Contextualization. They are the Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic, Transcendental and Counter-cultural models. Though each one of these models has different nuances, ideas and emphasis, all subscribe to the idea that Scripture, Tradition and Present Human Experience are the valid sources of genuine theology.

<sup>54</sup>Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology*, p. 31.

<sup>56</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>58</sup>Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 4.



“We are culture producing creatures; we make and inhabit meaningful words.”<sup>59</sup> Our world is not just out there since we are involved in its construction. “As our cultural and historical context plays a part in the construction of the reality in which we live, so our context influences the understanding of God and the expression of faith.”<sup>60</sup> Theology, as people come to understand it now, is ephemeral. There is no static theology for just as culture, though considered traditional, is growing or declining, so too must theology. We can only speak of theology that is meaningful to a certain group of people, and at a certain place and time. “The role of theology is to present an intelligible synthesis of perennial truths in such a manner that they become reasonably comprehensible and relevant for people today.”<sup>61</sup> A theology that remains distant, and does not address present issues and reflective of prevalent conditions becomes unpopular, one-sided and faulty. “Theology is always an effort to hear and understand on the part of man who has a secular historical experience.”<sup>62</sup>

Human experience, as a valid source for theological expressions, makes the faith prosper in these trying times. It must be remembered, however, that scripture and tradition are not to be taken for granted. In fact, scripture and tradition are records of personal experiences of people with God. They did not just fall from the sky. “They themselves are products of human beings, in their own concrete contexts, developed and conceived in human terms, and conditioned by human personality and human circumstances. As we study scripture and tradition, we not only have to be aware of their inevitable contextual nature, we have to read and interpret them within our context as well.”<sup>63</sup>

Scripture and tradition were indubitably products of the human experience, hence to be interpreted properly and contextually. Nevertheless, even though Inculturation recognizes the experience of the present, it does not, in any manner, see the experience of the past, recorded in scripture and defended in tradition, as meaningless. Present human experience is “dynamic because it is alive. Anything alive changes and at the same time conserves something of the past.”<sup>64</sup>

Inculturation must be faithful to the full experiences of the past. But the experiences of the past to be relevant to us, people must make it their own. “For that to happen, the received tradition must of course pass through the sieve of our own individual and contemporary-collective experience: we cannot give it, profess it as ours, unless such process occurs.”<sup>65</sup> This theology, then, is the meeting point of the past and present experiences of people with the Divine. What follows then is a discussion of the three important sources of authentic theology espoused by Inculturation. The interplay of *Scriptures*, *Tradition* and *Context* would produce a theology that is both dogmatically and culturally faithful.

### 3.3 The Roles of Scripture, Tradition and Human Experience

Inculturation acknowledges the three poles of theology: scripture, tradition and context. All three poles engage in dialogue with one another to produce a more authentic, relevant and faithful expression of faith.

#### 3.3.1. Scripture

For Christians, God speaks to humans. This “popular understanding suggests the imagery of a direct phone line between heaven and earth through which God made known certain essential truths for the benefit of humankind.”<sup>66</sup> God especially in the person of Jesus spoke to human beings and the evangelists faithfully wrote them down to form the Sacred Scripture. Supernatural words and supernatural truths coming from

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<sup>59</sup> Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, eds., *Social Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 314.

<sup>60</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology*, p.19.

<sup>65</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p.49.

heaven were revealed by God. “Coming as they did from the Eternal One, these truths are perennially valid for all places and all times.”<sup>67</sup>

Scripture functions as theology’s norming norm because it is the instrumentality of the God who speaks in and through the word for the construction of genuine faith expressions. “It is the ultimate norm of theology, the *norma normans non normata*, since every new theological insight ought to be tested against its testimony.”<sup>68</sup>

The Bible has authority because it was divinely inspired by God. It narrates the story of how God slowly revealed Godself to the chosen people of Israel. The summit of this narration is the story of Jesus of Nazareth who is the fullness of God’s revelation. By extension, the fullness of God’s revelation is also found in the text that narrates that story, the Bible. “The original authority of the Bible, its being a norming norm which is not in itself normed, lies in the total event of a new experience of salvation, gradually narrated in texts.”<sup>69</sup> New stories of Christian experience are possible if and when they provide legitimate translations of the original experiences found in the Scriptures. The Bible serves as the point of reference in any theological endeavor.

### 3.3.2. Tradition

Theology, to be Christian, ought to be rooted also in the historically-based tradition. Tradition refers to the profession of past confessional statements and practices that stand as the living testaments of past community of Christians in their communion with the divine. This tradition dates back to the ancient Jewish people and finds its culminating point in Jesus of Nazareth. “The faith experiences of Christians found and continually find their expression in a Tradition, a distinctive way of living and believing as a community which emerged and developed gradually in history.”<sup>70</sup>

Certain statements and symbols have become an integral part of the church’s life in its various cultural locations. These “classic statements and symbols of the historical community stand as milestones in the thought and life of the church universal and therefore have a special ongoing significance for the work of theology.”<sup>71</sup> They have been preserved and have continuously provided the stability of the faith. “For example, the near universal acceptance by the global Christian community of ecumenical statements such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed serves to make these —classic symbols of the faith a vital resource for theology.”<sup>72</sup> Confessions and creeds have long been a part of the Christian tradition and have played an important role in the formulation and construction of theology throughout the history of the church.

Christian believers of different generations, throughout the history of the Church, gave witness to their faith in God in their own social and contextual situations. “In this act they have participated in the faith of the one church as co-confessors with all who have acknowledged the one faith throughout the ages. So also, in confessing the one faith of the church in the present we become the contemporary embodiment of the legacy of faith that spans the ages and encompasses all the host of faithful believers.”<sup>73</sup> “It is these traditions which make Christians take their basic model of interpretation to understand reality, and also —as a framework which has to be re-rooted into their own socio-cultural situation so that it can be born anew and challenge the situation afresh.”<sup>74</sup>

Human beings confess their faith not in solidarity but in union with other faithful believers. They must do so in “continuity with the faith of the one people of God, including both our forebears who have made this confession in ages past and our successors who will do so in the future.”<sup>75</sup> In the task of theology, human beings must keep in mind that they are continuing the legacy of those who have engaged the task

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 98

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>74</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 47.

<sup>75</sup> Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 32.

before them and they must never forget to set the ground for dialogue and acceptance for the next generation. “Because we are members of this continuous historical community, the theological tradition of the church must be a crucial component in the construction of our contemporary theological statements so that we might maintain our theological and confessional unity.”<sup>76</sup>

### 3.3.3. Context

Aside from scripture and tradition, theology must take culture seriously as well. It is one of the authorities to which theologians must listen to. “While Western theology has tended to focus on the church as the sole repository of all truth and the only location in which the Spirit is operative,”<sup>77</sup> postmodern critique argues the fact the truth is not exclusive to the church alone. Context plays a crucial role in the people’s construction of meaning and truth.

The meaningfulness of a certain symbol, word or belief reflects real experience. “In other words the experience of our everyday existence in the world must give meaning and reality to our theological talk.”<sup>78</sup> Hence, a theology that does not touch real experience means nothing to an individual who is bound to a certain framework of thought and ideas. “It is only when our theological formulations are drawn from experience that we ensure their intelligibility.”<sup>79</sup>

Context, then provides, theology with a kind of rootedness. Though theology is seen as something transcendental, it must not be entirely the case. Humans also long for a theology that would speak to them in their own particularities. They long for a theology they can call their own using images, words and symbols that they themselves have constructed. Context somehow binds theology to the ground disallowing theology to stay off course. It enables faith expressions to be culturally valid and familiar to people. It assures that people can see the relationship between theological formulations and their ordinary experiences. —A theology which was written for eternity, a theology stripped of historicity, would be irrelevant to people living in time.”<sup>80</sup>

God’s word cannot be reduced to mere human activity. Yet God’s word is only given within human history and in a particular faith expression. Context reminds theology that the world is not a “valley of tears”<sup>81</sup> where humans must escape from. Considering the inculturated nature of faith enables people to “go back to the basic Christian conviction: God’s revelation is God’s offer of a full and meaningful life in human history of people who are struggling to find and to create meaning in their world of suffering and oppression.”<sup>82</sup> This offer of life comes to people not from the other world but in and through ordinary human experiences.

Theology is an ongoing dialogue between Scripture, Tradition, and Context. All three are vessels of the one God who revealed Godself in order to create an authentic expression of faith in a variety of local and particular settings. This approach seeks a flexible and versatile theology that recognizes the local and contextual character of human knowledge while simultaneously remaining distinctly Christian. “In this way theology is both one, in that all truly Christian theology seeks to hear and respond to the speaking of the one Spirit, and many, in that all theology emerges from particular social and historical situations. Such a theology is the product of the reflection of the Christian community in its local expressions. Despite its local character, such a theology is still in a certain sense global in that it seeks to explicate the Christian faith in accordance with the ecumenical tradition of the church throughout its history and on behalf of the church throughout the world.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 20.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>81</sup> Psalm 84:6

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>83</sup> Franke, *Reforming Theology: Toward a Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 17.

## 4. Factors of an Inculturated Theology

Theology today, if it wants to remain faithful to its mission, must take into serious account the context where a specific theological expression is being articulated. There are two set of factors that make Inculturation today not just the fare of theologians but everybody's concern. Below is a discussion of these two set of factors that extrapolate the need for Inculturation.

### 4.1 External Factors

A. "The first factor has something to do with a general dissatisfaction, in both First World and Third World, with classical approaches to theology."<sup>84</sup> Classical Theology today is judged unfit to answer present issues and challenges. People today feel that the traditional way of doing theology has already abandoned its prime mission to effect positive changes in the society. "The point is that any kind of understanding of theology as an unchanging, already finished *theologia perennis* is being challenged in the name of relevance."<sup>85</sup> People are convinced that customary approaches to theology are not meaningful in relation to their own culture and ideas.

In the Philippines, for example, the use of lamb as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice on the cross has been met, for the most part, with skepticism and sometimes ridicule by faithful believer. This is because ordinary Filipinos are not familiar with that animal. "It is as if Christianity is something imported, basically western, basically non-Filipino."<sup>86</sup>

B. A second external factor is the oppressive nature and hostility of traditional theology to culture. Bevans writes,

Latin American theologians have discovered that traditional theology, rather than speaking a word of hope to the marginalized masses of Latin America's poor, has often been used ideologically to justify the status quo of the continued domination by the rich and powerful. Older approaches to theology were filled with assumptions of male superiority, and produced consequent distortions regarding the notion of God, liturgical language and the role of women in ministry. The rule on celibacy, in many African societies, one's place as a man in society is determined by one's proven ability to have children.<sup>87</sup>

Above are just few of the many examples of the insensitivity and indifference of classical theology to people's most cherished beliefs and practices. Unless theology today becomes inculturated, oppression will continue even within the Church itself. Therefore the Church must acknowledge every particle of truth that each culture contains. If she wants to flourish in this world, she must be congenial to the truth expressed in each context. Admittedly, this is not just an option since there is no other option.

C. The third factor is concerned with the realization of the importance of self-identity. All throughout history, self-identity has been a blur concept for weaker countries that were colonized by one powerful country after another. The colonizer sets the tone for political, economic, social and even religious norms. "Colonialism fostered a feeling among those who were colonized that anything that was really good and worthwhile was something that originated in the colonizing country and that what was in the colony was sketchy, of poor quality, only the imitation of the real thing."<sup>88</sup> However, colonized countries begin to realize that there are values in their cultures that are just as good as, if not better than, those of their colonizers, and once this had been realized, former colonies and churches in these nations began to have confidence to work things out for themselves, on their own terms and in their own way.<sup>89</sup> They began to discover that their identity as a people is not dependent on any external factor, hence not given to them but made by them.

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<sup>84</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 19.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

Culture therefore is neither permanent nor universal. “Within the parameters of this idea, it is argued that culture is not something out there, but something that everyone participates in already.”<sup>90</sup> “In the area of religion, the need to express this new consciousness of independence and self-worth is particularly important.”<sup>91</sup> Efforts to contextualize theology are and must be done.

## 4.2 Internal Factors

Besides the cited external factors, there are also internal factors contributing to the rise of Inculturation. Without exaggeration, these internal factors offer stronger arguments to the necessity of doing theology in an inculturated way. These internal factors are the following:

**A.** “The first of these internal factors is the incarnational nature of Christianity.”<sup>92</sup> This is the best model and factor of Inculturation. God, in wanting to communicate His love for humanity, became a human being himself. And by becoming a human being, he has expressed this love in a way that is understandable to people. Jesus, the God who became man, has expressed the abstract concept of God in human terms. “God became flesh, not universally, but particularly. God became flesh, a human being, in the person of Jesus, a Jew, son of Mary, a male.”<sup>93</sup> God became a human being in a very particular way, having a particular personality, height, color and being bound to a specific culture. “Incarnation is a process of becoming particular, and in through the particular, the divinity could become visible again and in the same way becomes graspable and intelligible.”<sup>94</sup>

“God is claimed to have revealed eternal truths necessary for human salvation.”<sup>95</sup> However, these eternal truths were revealed in particular ways. Jesus, the eternal word, became a human being, hence revealed eternity in particularity. God became man to concretize God’s salvific work in the world. God did not reveal Godself from the heavens. God made himself visible as a person among people. If God did not assume humanity, the gap between God and human beings would not have been bridged. “His willingness to accommodate to the needs of our situation to the extent of becoming incarnate in the form of a man, serves as the model for a humble theology that exists primarily to meet the real needs of the context.”<sup>96</sup>

“We are limited creatures, even our speaking of God is limited. Yet for a religion whose central doctrine is the incarnation this should not be a problem. If God did not despise and despair of the limitations of the human condition, why should we? Why should we aspire to be philosophical angels when God became a man?”<sup>97</sup> It is the duty of people to continue this process of incarnation. Christians should continue to touch lives and reveal God as Asian or European, as male or female, as affluent or poor, as white or brown. Christians must be able to speak to rebels, to businessmen, to politicians, to the rich and powerful, to women and children, to the sick and the outcast. “Christianity, if it is to be faithful to its deepest roots and to its most basic insight, must continue God’s incarnation in Jesus by becoming contextual.”<sup>98</sup> “The Son of God assumed the form of a servant to seek and save the lost and theology must do likewise, incarnating itself in the cultural forms of its time without ever losing its identity as Christian theology.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 2.

<sup>96</sup> Marc Cortez, “Creation and Context: A Theological Framework for Contextual Theology,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Portland: Western Seminary, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, “The Truth Looks Different from Here,” in *Christ and Context: The Confrontation between Gospel and Culture* (eds. Hilary D. Regan and Alan J. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>98</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 12.

<sup>99</sup> David Wells, “The Nature and Function of Theology,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, (ed. R. K. Johnston; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 15.

The incarnation is not a one-way traffic. It is in fact two-way. “It is an exchange or dialogue between the pole of God’s word (including the Judeo-Christians tradition) and the pole of human culture.”<sup>100</sup> Vatican II states, “In order to be able to offer all to them the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, the Church must be part of all these groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind himself, in virtue of his incarnation, to the definite social and cultural conditions of those human beings among He dwelt.”<sup>101</sup>

**B.** A second internal factor is the sacramental nature of reality. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>102</sup> The world, therefore, becomes a mirror of God’s goodness and wisdom. The human world is not regarded as “opaque, yielding only what satisfies scientific inquiry. Rather it is transparent, and invites a deeper probe.”<sup>103</sup> “God, who creates and conserves all things by his word, provides men with constant evidence of himself in created realities.”<sup>104</sup> Through created reality, God is present and becomes visible. Reality then reflects the creator. “The glory of God consists in the realization of this manifestation and communication of his goodness, for which the world was created.”<sup>105</sup>

Reality for those who consider themselves as belonging to the Judeo-Christian Tradition is not *a thing-in-itself*, but rather *a thing through God*.<sup>106</sup> Christians believe that God is present in and through the realities of life whatever form of life one has. The world is not a wall but a gate, a gate than opens up to the mystery of God.

Creation reveals God. Thus God is encountered in beautiful sunsets, in innocent smiles of children, in the poured water of Baptism, in the community gathered for bible sharing, in forgiveness and relationships. “If the ordinary things of life are so transparent of God’s presence, one can speak of culture, human experience, and events in History ‘of contexts’ as truly sacramental and so revelatory.”<sup>107</sup> Contexts, therefore, are packed with divine sacredness. “The business of theology then, is to confront man’s view of life with the message of the Gospel, because theology is always an effort to hear and understand on the part of a man who has a secular historical experience.”<sup>108</sup>

**C.** The third factor talks about the shift from the classical to the new understanding of the nature of divine revelation. “Divine revelation was presented in the form of eternal truths handed down to us from Christ and the Apostles.”<sup>109</sup> “These truths, according to the faith of the Universal Church, is contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the apostles, by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, having been transmitted, as it were, from hand to hand.”<sup>110</sup> God’s revelation of these truths, therefore, had ceased with the death of the last apostle. Revelation, in this manner, is understood as complete. All these perennial truths were arranged and systematized and presented as the Catholic Faith.

It should be noted, however, that theological thought leading to Vatican II, began to shift emphasis and spoke of revelation in a more interpersonal way. “In this fresh understanding of theology, revelation was conceived as the offer of God’s very self to men and women by means of concrete actions and symbols in history and in individuals’ daily life.”<sup>111</sup> Faith is now conceived not as the understanding of the eternal truths but rather a personal response to God. “Although God had fully revealed himself to the world through

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<sup>100</sup> Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology*, p. 31.

<sup>101</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Ad Gentes: Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church* Vatican City, 1965), no. 10

<sup>102</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 279.

<sup>103</sup> Jose De Mesa, *Bakas: Retrieving the Sense of Sacramentality of the Ordinary* (Pasig: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2008), p.

xiv.

<sup>104</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 54.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 293.

<sup>106</sup> De Mesa, *Bakas: Retrieving the Sense of Sacramentality of the Ordinary*, xiv.

<sup>107</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 12.

<sup>108</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 6.

<sup>109</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 13.

<sup>110</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 13.

Jesus, God's revealing action was also seen as something that was ongoing as God continues to offer Godself to men and women in their daily lives."<sup>112</sup>

God's revelation goes with the different contours of this world. Bevans writes,

When Revelation was understood in terms of eternal truths frames in unchanging and unchangeable divinely given language, theology could be conceived as being itself unchanging and as having little or nothing to do with the realities of culture and social change. But as revelation has come to be conceived in terms of a personal self-offer of God's very self to men and women, an offer of friendship and loving relationship, the question must inevitably be asked whether such an offer could be made in any way except in terms that men and women could understand.<sup>113</sup>

Revelation, then to humans had to be God's offer of relationship in terms that make sense to them and is congenial to their culture. Revelation to Americans or Europeans must be in terms and languages which they are most familiar with. God's offer of friendship and salvation to Africans has to be expressed in quite a different manner. Christians, in representing God, must remain faithful to their fundamental mission of doing theology that takes seriously the context in which men and women experience God.

**D.**The fourth factor talks about the catholicity of the church. "Catholic comes from two Greek words, *kata* and *holos*, and points to the all-embracing, all-inclusive, all-accepting nature of the Christian community."<sup>114</sup> To be called genuine catholic, the church must learn to accept and embrace every race, culture and tradition. Catholicity considers not only the faith of peoples, but also their economic, social and historical setting. It is the acceptance of the integrity of all people in all aspects of their lives. It suggests that the theological task "is one that must be done in dialogical participation with the whole church operating out of a variety of contexts, respecting the right that the context in question has to be heard, and ultimately exercising its right to speak trans-contextually."<sup>115</sup>

The unity of the body of Christ should also remind us that theology is a properly communal activity. "Rather than the Enlightenment model of the solitary scholar espousing rationally constructed systems of theology or the Romanticist model of the isolated individual communing with the god in nature, many thinkers have called for Christian theologians to remember that theology should be an activity of the Church as it seeks to understand and express its faith commitments."<sup>116</sup> Theology was never intended to be a personal affair. For a theology to be contextually relevant and theologically appropriate, it must be done together with other fellow believers.

"A truly Catholic church embraces the human because it sees the human as good and holy."<sup>117</sup> Instead of looking at human experience as irrelevant and meaningless in the theological quest, the Church must acknowledge the different expressions of different people in expressing life's deepest yearnings and hopes. "In the intellectualistic approach of classical theology, theology is seen as the direct communication by God of eternal truths but such a misunderstanding of God's revelation necessarily led to a short-cut, in which we only had to passively receive the divine truths for our eternal salvation beyond all fleeing, subjective human experience."<sup>118</sup> "A Catholic Church is a Church that believes passionately in God's revelation in the incarnation and has a heightened sense of creation's sacramentality."<sup>119</sup>

Catholicity is often translated as 'universality' and is regarded as one of the marks of the church. However, the church does not seek bland uniformity since this is a futile mission. Catholicity is the dimension of the church that champions and preserves the local and the particular. "Christianity is endowed with a dynamic that moves toward unity through a rich diversity, through conversation and even argument among people of particular personal, cultural and historical experience."<sup>120</sup> The church, therefore, should be open for

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Cortez, "Creation and Context: A Theological Framework for Contextual Theology," in *Westminster Theological Journal*, p. 13.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>117</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 14.

<sup>118</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 17.

<sup>119</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 14.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

dialogue. Gone are the days when the church could reach people through authority and sometimes coercion. “We must therefore develop a ‘culture of otherness’ that respects other contexts even as we insist on our own right to be heard, maintaining not only the possibility but also the necessity of inter-contextual dialogue and critique.”<sup>121</sup> Just like the dialogical nature of the Trinity, the church must be a dynamic, relational community whose mission is to be active and present in the world. “Through the presence of the Spirit and the concrete flesh and humanity of the Logos, God works for salvation in the midst of human context, its cultures, its events, its sufferings, its joys.”<sup>122</sup> Human beings need to approach other people with a humble acceptance of those who are other than themselves recognizing their dignity as created in the likeness and image of God who has the right to speak, be heard, and participate in the theological dialogue.

Inculturation proves useful in the postmodern world. Its major concepts answer postmodern critiques. However, as with any approach, it certainly has its shortcomings. What follows then is an exploration of the issues related to Inculturation.

## 5. Issues in Inculturation

The fact that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”<sup>123</sup> should be a serious reminder that all ways of theologizing are done with a significant handicap. Because Inculturation is somehow a deviation from the traditional way of doing theology, it encounters some issues and questions seldom dealt with in classical theology. With its emphasis on the present human context, new methods are being discovered along with new problems and concerns.

### 5.1 The Issue of Paternalism

“Since the Middle Ages and the beginning of scholasticism, theology has been regarded as a scholar academic discipline.”<sup>124</sup> The discipline of theology was confined in academic institutions and only learned people can participate in its articulation. Its form takes on a classroom lecture, scholarly article or voluminous books. However, when context is given emphasis, not only is the theological context affected, so does its form. The discursive type of theology is regarded now as just one of the many valid expressions of theology which includes rituals, artworks, hymns, literature and dance. “The point here, in any case, is to realize that theology is a wider activity than just scholarship that various cultures have preferred other ways of articulating their faith.”<sup>125</sup>

In the same way that traditional theology was understood as a rigorous academic discipline, the theologian was also seen as a learned academician whose mastery over Christian tradition, scripture, exegesis, and history is exemplary. Theology was restricted to trained theologians. Their way of theologizing became the norm to be followed. Everything that deviates from the norm established is considered superstition. “Such a picture of theology and the theologian made sense as long as theology was conceived as being a reflection on documents that needed considerable background skill to understand.”<sup>126</sup> However, when theology starts to focus on the present human experience, the question whether ordinary individuals, who are immersed in a particular human situation, can participate in the enterprise of theology.

Theology is very important a matter to be left to trained theologians alone. The people are legitimate partners in the Inculturation process. “It is not really done by experts and then trickled down to the people for their consumption.”<sup>127</sup> If theology truly considers context, then it must be mostly done by its subject. “History has shown that the people are the best contextualizers of theology. As the saying goes, *vox populi, vox Dei*. (The voice of the people is the voice of God.”<sup>128</sup> “What seems important is to conceive theology in

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<sup>121</sup> Giuseppe Ruggieri, “The Unity of the Church through the Unity of Humankind,” in *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity?* eds. Giuseppe Ruggieri and Miklos Tomka (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), p. 147.

<sup>122</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 15.

<sup>123</sup> Romans 3: 23

<sup>124</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 17.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>128</sup> Leonardo Mercado, *Christ in the Philippines* (Tagaytay City: Divine Word Publications, 1982), p. 24.



terms of a constant dialogue between the people-who are the subjects of culture and cultural change and so have a preeminent place in the enterprise of seeking to understand Christian faith in a particular context- and the professional theologian who articulates, deepens, and broadens the people's faith expression with his or her wider knowledge of the Christian tradition and, perhaps the articulation of faith in other contexts."<sup>129</sup> To take present context seriously is to accept that theology is never a finished-product ready to be used. It is never meant to be a hand-me-down discipline. Also, theology must never be a mere recording of what people think. "On the side of people, the theologian must also be aware that not everything that people may theologize is necessarily theology."<sup>130</sup> "Theology must rather be an activity of dialogue, emerging out of a mutual respect between the faith-ful but not technically trained people and faith-ful and listening professionals."<sup>131</sup>

The people of a given situation and the trained theologian play an important role in the production of an authentic and meaningful faith expression. The questions now are: Can a person who does not share the full experience of another actually do genuine theology within a specific culture or context? Is it really valid for a foreigner to take part in the process of Inculturation?

The answer is no. "A person who does not fully share one's experience is not to be fully trusted to speak of God in that person's context."<sup>132</sup> Non-participants ultimately cannot fully understand the ways and means of a particular group of people living a particular way of life. Instead of helping the people, they might be distorting theology by bringing with them their own prejudices and biases.

However, to a certain extent, a nonparticipant can contribute to the development of Inculturation. "In some cases, an outsider may be more in tune with a particular culture than many of those who are born within it."<sup>133</sup> There are instances when an outsider is more African than other Africans or more Filipino than most Filipinos. "If a person approaches a culture or context openly, is willing to learn the necessary language or languages, and is willing to read and appropriate sociological and anthropological literature about a particular culture, he or she can understand much of what the particular culture is all about."<sup>134</sup> In a limited but never in a complete way, an outsider can help in developing a theology that is culturally sensitive. He/she can provide insights into the culture and can clearly see its negative aspects which needed to be purified and positive aspects which needed to be enhanced. He/she can also stimulate in the people the need to theologize. As Bevans writes,

One way a nonparticipant can help in the construction of a local contextual theology is simply to do theology in a way that makes the most sense to him or her as a particular subject. Inevitably, if this is done, one's students or congregation or readers will be struck by the difference from the way they think- some things will seem irrelevant, others challenging, still others will perhaps be found to be offensive. If participants in a particular context could take the further step of asking why a particular idea or theological approach is irrelevant or challenging or offensive, they are well on their way to actually doing theology as subjects in that context (having a certain experience, belonging to a particular culture, living in a particular social location, or in a particular situation of social change. As they are confronted with what they are not, they might more easily discover who they are and might express their faith as who they are.<sup>135</sup>

An outsider can indeed help in the production of an authentic theology. However one must do this in the spirit of humility, honesty and openness. When one approaches a context that is not his or hers, he or she must do it in an atmosphere of mutual respect and dialogue. A nonparticipant must be mindful of her own biases and must welcome ideas which sometimes run contrary to what he/she believes. "Genuine theology can indeed grow out of genuine dialogue between the participants in a particular culture and the stranger, the guest, the other."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 18.

<sup>130</sup> Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Tagaytay City: Divine Word Publications, 1975), p.15.

<sup>131</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 18.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

## 5.2 The Issue of Orthodoxy/Syncretism

“Granted that Christ as presented in the Bible is to be incarnated in a given, situated culture, the problem of how remains.”<sup>137</sup> Theology should be the mutual interaction of Christianity and culture. Since there are many cultures, then it follows that divergent interpretations may also exist. “This pluriformity may threaten the unity of the Church, even on the level of the local community, because different forms of interpretation of faith, of spirituality, and moral behavior may exist side by side. Polarization may ensue where there is a gap between the official interpretation of the Church regarding specific issues and the views of those who are searching for their own way to live the faith.”<sup>138</sup> Too much emphasis on culture makes the interaction loop-side and faulty. A real danger in Inculturation is that “one could mix Christianity and culture in a way that does not enhance but compromises and betrays Christianity.”<sup>139</sup>

Theological expressions should take into account culture but not to the point of mutilating the Christian faith. The plurality of theologies speaks of true Inculturation. Nevertheless, these theologies must always be seen with suspicion and caution. De Mesa writes,

If there are so many divergent, and sometimes apparently conflicting interpretations, how can we be sure that our understanding of our faith is correct, that is, faithful to the Judeo-Christian Tradition? Is it possible to recognize the one faith in the different interpretations? Does pluralism not become an ideology of adaptation when what is adapted or inculturated is considered to be correct? Should we not, perhaps, re-introduce at least some basic and universal truths, conceptually expressed and accepted as such?<sup>140</sup>

De Mesa then underscores three criteria for orthodoxy: (1) the criterion of orientation to life, (2) the criterion of Christian orthopractice, and (3) the criterion of acceptance by the whole Christian community.

The criterion of orientation to life means that “faith is only genuinely faith if it is inwardly orientated to life from its inception to its fulfillment by God’s revelation.”<sup>141</sup> Because God’s life-giving revelation is directed to humans, then their response to this initiative should also be life-giving. Despite the pluralism of faith interpretations, the life-giving element of every interpretation should never be forgotten. Hence anything that enhances life is a valid faith interpretation and vice versa.

The second criterion is connected to the first. Faith interpretations are directed towards a deeper appreciation of life. However, “the basic orientation or intentionality of faith cannot simply be discovered in a purely theoretical manner through the comparison of different theological articulations.”<sup>142</sup> Faith orientation without practice is empty and sterile. The second criterion encourages Christians to reflect on how their particular expressions function in their lives. A theological expression which leads to an un-Christian action should certainly be dismissed.

The third criterion speaks about the validity of a certain faith interpretation to the whole community. It is the “criterion of acceptance by the people of God or proper reception.”<sup>143</sup> The community will play an important role in the verification of a faith expression by its acceptance or non-acceptance. “The final subject of the interpretation of faith is the community as a whole.”<sup>144</sup>

“New articulations of faith are not the sole privilege of the magisterium... The clericalism of the past centuries in the Catholic Church had left little room for the *sensus fidelium* and had the acceptance of the faithful as mere act of obedience to the hierarchy.”<sup>145</sup> Inculturation empowers the laity to express their faith interpretations without fear of being ridiculed or doubted. These local theologies may not exhaust the whole

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<sup>137</sup> Mercado, *Christ in the Philippines*, p. 21.

<sup>138</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 90.

<sup>139</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 22.

<sup>140</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 90.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>143</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 23.

<sup>144</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 115.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

of the Gospel. They may even be subject to criticisms by other churches. However, it is “hope that they will have a chance to grow and to mature.”<sup>146</sup> “If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God.”<sup>147</sup>

There is no doubt that when culture is taken seriously in the fare of theology, the latter would be more emphasized than the former. A theologian may take the realities of culture superior than scripture and tradition. “But even more dangerous is a theology that speaks to no one, that has no power because it has no real audience.”<sup>148</sup> Inculturation may be a tedious process and it will always have the tendency to fall into the dangers mentioned above. It should be noted, however, that it will always seek for the proper criteria to judge differing interpretations of the faith just to make faith relevant and meaningful.

### 5.3 The Issue of Cultural Identity

“Because of the subtle and not-so-subtle mentality of colonialism and the narrowness of theology and missionary vision in the past, much of the richness of many local cultures has been ignored or suppressed.”<sup>149</sup> In line with this, former colonies at present are now undertaking the process of decolonization to recover their cultural identity. “This basic appreciative awareness of the importance of culture as a theological source is an imminently true and valid way of doing theology in a particular context.”<sup>150</sup> However, it certainly has drawbacks.

“One drawback in seeking cultural identity as a theological source is the danger of falling into a kind of cultural romanticism-of basing one’s theology not upon culture as it is today but on a culture (fossil culture) that did exist before colonization but after colonization and contact with the western world does not exist except in some people’s romantic fantasies.”<sup>151</sup> One main characteristic of culture that should be taken into consideration is that it is never at a standstill. As ways of making sense of reality, cultural realities are always in a constant state of flux. The fact that the native culture has interacted with foreign cultures mean that change is inevitable. “If a theology or a particular church resists cultural change in the name of the contextualization of Christianity, such resistance, rather than opening a culture to its greatest potential, functions as a conservative force and actually works against the good of a culture.”<sup>152</sup>

While many accusations of missionaries destroying cultures in their effort to preach Christ are surely exaggerated, such destruction did indeed take place.”<sup>153</sup> However, there is no point to judge their actions as wrong or to demonize what they have done for the sake of the preaching Christ. To fend off the influence of other cultures is easier said than done. Colonization has ultimately brought with it changes in the native culture so it is never the same again. Meeting cultures other than one’s own is a condition that one cannot escape against the background of colonization. “If theology is really to be in context, therefore, it cannot simply deal with a culture that no longer exists.”<sup>154</sup> People should never look for a pure culture since such does not exist. Theology then must take into consideration present cultural realities as the prime locus of Inculturation.

### 5.4. The Issue of Heresy

The people are the best inculturators. What people believe in is one basis of a sound doctrine. However, should all the beliefs be considered as valid sources of theology? Is everything in the culture good?

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>147</sup> Acts 6:39

<sup>148</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 24.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

Culture has potentialities which can be harnessed either for good or evil. Though Inculturation gives emphasis to culture, it is by no means a rejection of the faith-experience of people found in the scripture and lived in the tradition of the Church. But for Inculturation to happen, symbols and categories used in theologizing must be familiar to the people to whom the theologizing is done. In the Philippine setting, for instance, religion is inextricably cultural and vice versa. “Religious customs and practices that were brought by the colonizing Spaniards have entered into the fabric not only of Philippine religious life but of Philippine culture as well.”<sup>155</sup> This paved the way for the birth of popular religiosity.

Popular religiosity is a form of “Catholic faith which is tightly bound to the cultural traditions of the people and which is adhered to by the majority of the people.”<sup>156</sup> It is a kind of expression of faith that is accepted by many because it uses symbols meaningful to the culture at hand. However, there is just a thin line between genuine Inculturation and mere superstitious beliefs. “One needs to bear in mind that just because folk Catholicism is rooted in the culture and is meaningful, it does not necessarily mean that all is well. Culture has its share of ambiguity: enhancing life, but also detracting it.”<sup>157</sup> Popular religiosity needs to be purified of its damaging dimensions. For instance, “despite the love of Filipinos for *Santo Entierro* (the dead Christ) and *Santo Nino* (the baby Jesus), these images of Christ might need to be balanced with a strong image of Jesus the worker, Jesus the human being, or with an image of the risen Christ who has successfully faced the terrors of evil, injustice and death.”<sup>158</sup>

The problem of heresy arises when particular contexts are considered primary to scripture and tradition. It also happens when expressions of faith run contrary to the universal expression espoused by the Church. Inculturation then must heed the insights of particular contexts while remaining faithful to the basic tenets of the Christian faith. In the activity of Inculturation, it might be more genuinely Filipino, for instance, to substitute palm wine and rice cakes for bread and wine at the Eucharist, but whether the people will actually feel comfortable with such a substitution might be very much in doubt.”<sup>159</sup> Translating, as an approach to Inculturation, might bypass the contributions of centuries-old Christian traditions, will suffer from the subjectivity or biases of the scholar and overstates the local form but neglects the universal.”<sup>160</sup> “Whatever product comes out of the process of theologizing is never a finished product... for there is an on-going process of purification, synthesis, and finding its resonance on the people for whom theology is meant.”<sup>161</sup>

## 6. Inculturation in Critique

To give the paper a more holistic approach, the researcher deemed it necessary to expose the shortcomings accused against Inculturation. It would be now fitting to critique Inculturation to strengthen its good points while re-evaluating its weaknesses.

Inculturation is a beam of hope for the faithful. Given the fragmented notion of reality espoused by postmodernism, it gives the faithful a chance to proclaim the faith in postmodern standards. Although it is not a new approach because it has its roots that dates back to biblical times, contemporary issues and challenges encourage the faithful to look for more creative and relevant approaches to faith. It provides people with the consciousness that theology is not something given to them but something that they create and sustain.

This paper argues that Inculturation answers a few of the postmodern claims. First, it is amiable to the postmodern notion of the *other*. Inculturation gives people the opportunity to hear and discover the little narratives which were often neglected and abused in the past. It gives them the chance to be more sensitive to the small faith stories and expressions which were often accused of heresy and subjected to ridicule. This paper argues that Inculturation is a form deconstruction. It deconstructs classical theology and its grand way of explaining faith. However, the danger here lies in the differing notions of reality. To listen to the *other* is

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>156</sup> De Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home*, p. 81.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 26.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>160</sup> Mercado, *Christ in the Philippines*, p. 23.

<sup>161</sup> Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology*, pp. 13-15.

what humans need. Yet differing notions of reality will be a cause of further division. Inculturation can strip off the church its magisterial responsibilities and excuse others from paternal correction. How does the church now reconcile the spirit of dialogue with the laying down of the law?

To reconstruct this, the researcher agrees with the postmodern claim of acceptance of the other. Inculturation deconstructs the grand way of doing theology as it considers the present context of the individuals. To embrace the other is also to embrace their differing notions of reality. In the process of Inculturation, however, the Church should not just accept passively cultural presuppositions. People's cultures are ambivalent as they both have positive and negative sides. This reconstruction contends that just because a practice of Inculturation is culturally bound does not mean that it is scripturally and traditionally faithful. Just as culture purifies scriptures and traditions, so do both factors purify culture.

Second, Inculturation engages people in dialogue. To take culture as a valid source of theology, people are encouraged to practice dialogue with one another as they produce a theology that is culturally relevant. However, the problem remains whether such dialogue would be done transculturally as well. Inculturation may allow horizons to meet. However, would Inculturation be effective if many cultures are already considered? Is it possible to posit principles that are transcultural? "Communication between cultures is manifestly possible and realizable, but the number of cultural universals that remain after such encounter continues to dwindle."<sup>162</sup> Hence, Inculturation must be aware that transcultural principles lead to general principles that will be insensitive to the particularities of the culture to which they came from. To hear little narratives is not enough. Since Inculturation encourages people to be theologians in their own rights, then it follows that a plurality of theologies will be created. Inculturation, as a relatively new approach, may not be ready for all the theologies that will be formulated. The church needs universal principles not only to unite people but also to be faithful to the life and mission of Jesus the Christ preserved in the living tradition of the church. Inculturation must create principles that transcend the particularities of culture but at the same time remaining faithful to the unique worldview the culture uses when looking at reality. To engage in dialogue within the culture and amongst other cultures, the participants must set the parameters and criteria to be followed to make the dialogue mutually rich and fruitful keeping in mind the need to set general principles while never losing touch of the particularities and uniqueness each culture has.

This research also contends that Inculturation is perspectival theology. Perspectival thinking is important as it shows how humans interpret reality. Inculturation maintains that although perspectival thinking allows for the plurality of truth and truth claims, universal standards to unite the differing perspectives are still needed. Scripture and tradition could provide these universal standards.

Third, Inculturation, within the background of postmodernism, might fuel relativism and pluralism. It faces these issues "because of the variety of cultural differences."<sup>163</sup> It brings up the "problem of the local versus the universal. If an individual or a community gives too much respect to a local culture he or the community could lose their universal outlook."<sup>164</sup> This chapter argues together with postmodernism that faith is relative and plural. However, the researcher argues that faith is relative and plural not because there is no universal faith but because the expression of this universal faith is varied and is contextually-bound. Human beings confess their faith not in solitude but in communion with other believers.

Fourth, postmodernism champions the idea that reason is not the be-all and the end-all of things. It is not the ultimate criterion to view reality. It is just one of the approaches to reality. In the same way, Inculturation contends that faith is oftentimes irrational. A man worshipping the rain or the sun would be ridiculed by reason. However, postmodernism would consider this practice as part of the little narratives that should be heard and seen.

The word Inculturation is of recent coinage and has been accepted as part of the discipline of theology. However, not all is well for this approach. Inculturation is a term with certain connotations which ultimately would create confusion. For instance, Inculturation has been tied up with adaptation though both

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<sup>162</sup> Schreiter, "Faith and Cultures: Challenges to a World Church," in *Theological Studies*, pp. 759-760.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Byrne, *Some Ins and Outs of Inculturation*, p. 144.

terms differ in meaning and framework. Adaptation signifies two things. “First, that missionaries should adapt themselves to the cultures of the people to whom they take the Gospel; second, as regards the contents of their message, that it should not be adapted (missionaries should preach the Gospel, which is a universal and changeless message) but simply be rendered intelligible.”<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, Inculturation differs in a way because the actors are not the missionaries but the local people having the local culture. “As regards the message (which has been brought by the missionaries and been made intelligible), Inculturation refers not to its translation into local terms but rather to a new creation within the culture.”<sup>166</sup> Adaptation and Inculturation go hand in hand. However, the latter goes beyond the former. The risk here is to see both as synonymous to one another. The distinction should be made clearly because the faithful might now know whether they are merely adapting or whether they are already involved in Inculturation.

Inculturation has certainly accomplished a great feat by mixing culture and faith. However the problem remains how this mixture is to be crafted. To avoid the issues of orthodoxy, and heresy, balance must be strike between the elements of faith and the elements of culture. Too much emphasis on faith and tradition would absolutize each of them. Not only would faith and tradition be questioned by postmodern standards, they will also result to further alienation of the faithful believers who exist in a given social milieu. On the other hand, too much emphasis on culture might result to more relativism. Faith should unite people. If too much cultural elements are at play, then people would see more their differences rather than focus on the things that bind them. Faith-expressions derived from cultural images would be congenial to the culture. However, it would not anymore remain faithful to the basic principles of faith. These two extremes must be avoided. This chapter calls for the theologian and the people to seek the middle ground. Criteria should be constructed so that there will be a balance in the faith expressions. Steps must be laid out towards genuine Inculturation.

If Inculturation considers culture, can a non-participant of the culture be involved in the process? It seems that only natives of the culture have the right to be involved. This is the issue of paternalism. However, there are many examples of Inculturation where foreigners of the culture directly participate in? To what extent is the participation of non-natives? Are there rules to be followed to make sure that these nonparticipants have already removed their biases and will be able to look at the other culture from the natives’ eyes? It also is worth noting that “no prophet is accepted in his own hometown.”<sup>167</sup> “Experience shows that often one will accept the message of salvation from a stranger more willingly than from a fellow countryman (whom one thinks, wrongly perhaps, that one knows thoroughly and therefore one tends to discount).”<sup>168</sup>

In addition, scholastic theology has clearly identified who the theologian is. The theologian, in scholasticism, is the trained professional who finished philosophy and theology. The identity of the theologian can be questioned in the process of Inculturation. Inculturation makes the people theologians in their own right. In the process on Inculturation, it seems that to be a theologian does not anymore need philosophy and theology. A person can be a theologian just by being a native of the culture. Besides that, what if the theologian is a non-participant of the culture? Who has more impact on the Inculturation process?

Inculturation uses culture as a framework for starting theology. The problem remains how much of the culture is to be used. This is the issue of cultural identity. Admittedly culture has its positive and negative aspects. Will Inculturation deal with both aspects and how will it deal with them? What happens when cultural values and gospel values contradict one another? Which would be prioritized? Take the case of homosexuality. In some cultures, homosexuality is allowed even encouraged. The church however stands by her conviction that God created “male and female”<sup>169</sup> only. In standing for her belief, does it directly oppress the rights of people to express themselves freely without judgment? Inculturation then must be aware of the

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Luke 4:24

<sup>168</sup> Byrne, *Some Ins and Outs of Inculturation*, p. 115.

<sup>169</sup> Genesis 1:27

oppressive tendencies of the Christian tradition. It must avoid a “rupture between the faith and local culture taking place. Local cultural values should be integrated.”<sup>170</sup>

Another danger of Inculturation is the temptation to return to paganism and to the old life. “It is easy to want to return to one’s own local, more familiar and more easygoing customs.”<sup>171</sup> This is because Christianity is sometimes hard to follow. This has happened in the biblical times. It is possible to think that a situation like this will happen again.

It must also be noted that some cultures are not without colonial influence. Hence to look for a pure culture is rather absurd. How will the people free their culture from the stigma it bears because of years of colonization? In addition, not only is a pure culture illusory, culture is also dynamic. Principles, beliefs and ideas will change. In the vein, Inculturation will also change as culture changes.

Inculturation should not only mix culture and faith. More so, it must oblige people to liberate themselves from oppression and situations of injustice. “The biggest critique of Inculturation is that it tends to limit the incarnational motif of the gospel to the zone of the cultural and personal renewal which excludes socio-economic and political issues from the legitimate concern of the Christian faith.”<sup>172</sup> How will Inculturation change corruption, poverty and malnutrition especially if the culture permits such maladies to exist? It is “undeniable that salvation is not naively seen only as the soul being saved, but it also involves issues of socio-economic and political concepts.”<sup>173</sup> The paper argues that Inculturation must not only dig up remnants of the past but also concern itself with contemporary issues and challenges. Inculturation champions the idea of context. However, it sometimes does not understand the very context which it seeks to address.

## 7. Summary

Inculturation is on the map of theology. It is not something optional. It is a theological imperative. To further elucidate the concepts at work, this chapter started with the need for Inculturation in the context of this postmodern world. It has been established that this approach may enable the Church to thrive despite the challenges of postmodernity. A discussion on context and culture followed to explore the potentialities of culture in the Inculturation process. In addition, Inculturation was contrasted with the classical way of doing theology which conceived theology as something universal and transcendental. Then Inculturation, as a fresh approach to theology is further explained. It was discovered that this approach was something both traditional and new. It is traditional because it dates back to biblical times. It is considered new because it considers another source of theology. Context, aside from Scriptures and Tradition, is a legitimate basis of authentic theology. Also cited are the factors that justify the need for employing such approach. Issues in Inculturation were also cited to give a more holistic discussion. Inculturation is certainly not free of limitations. This is the reason why a critique was established to give the study an opportunity to assess what needs to be improved upon.

## 8. Conclusion

Human experience is a sacred shine that theology cannot desecrate and defile. Inculturation offers us a new way of doing theology that considers the locus of all values, the person’s experience and community. Admittedly, “we need to arrive at a new understanding of theology which is culturally intelligible, situationally relevant and pastorally meaningful.”<sup>174</sup> This can only be done through inculturating theology. A theology can only be substantive if it is expressed in a way that is faithful to the shared understanding of the members of a community.

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<sup>170</sup> Byrne, *Some Ins and Outs of Inculturation*, p. 130.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>172</sup> SiyabongaNtombela, *A Critique of the Theology of Inculturation*, retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu/12903608> on October 30, 2015, p. 7.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>174</sup> De Mesa and Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes*, p. 4.

Inculturation happens when there is a mutual interaction between tradition, scriptures and present human experience. The pole of scripture and tradition and the pole of human context interact with one another. Theology cannot give relevance to one pole over another. To give priority to the pole of scripture and tradition means an “absolutizing of a historically bound formulation; and do so in the second case would be to neglect the Faith Tradition which we Christians claim to live by.”<sup>175</sup>

Inculturation makes it possible for supernatural truths revealed by God to enlighten and nourish ordinary individuals who were born in a particular time and situation. “We have to re-establish a theological method which allows Christianity to really enter into new places: we need a critical reading together (mutual interaction) of two poles, the pole of the Judeo-Christian Tradition of faith experiences, and the pole of our present-day experience, located within a specific cultural and historical matrix.”<sup>176</sup>

“A framework that is scripturally normative, traditionally informed, and culturally embedded is essential to this thesis, which strives to be biblically reflective and culturally engaged.”<sup>177</sup> Inculturation is what the Church needs to open the door for a fresh, relevant and innovative way of theologizing. Although Inculturation has its weaknesses, it certainly is the best way to do theology in this contemporary world. The critiques of Inculturation are a “compliment paid by mankind to the Catholic Church. Only a universal religion faces this problem.”<sup>178</sup> It is indeed a great task yet a fruitful task to have.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>177</sup> Braun, *Towards a Contextual Theology of Community: an Exploration of the Body of Christ Metaphor*, p. 2.

<sup>178</sup> Byrne, *Some Ins and Outs of Inculturation*, p. 149.



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