

Decree 4: OUR MISSION AND CULTURE

- 75 1. General Congregation 34 has brought together Jesuits from the cultures of Asia, the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe, the European Community, Africa, North America, Australia and Latin America; this composition has heightened our awareness of the diversity of cultures in both the world and the Society, and of the need to address the importance for our mission of *the Gospel and culture*.¹
- 76 2. In recent years, the Church has made this theme one of its central points of reflection. Pope Paul VI wrote that "the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt *the tragedy of our time*."² More recently, Pope John Paul II has presented inculturation as one of the fundamental aspects of the Church's total evangelizing mission and points to the *mutuality* between the Gospel and the cultures it engages. The Christian message is to be open to all cultures, bound to no single culture and made accessible to every human person through a process of inculturation, by which the Gospel introduces something new into the culture and the culture brings something new to the richness of the Gospel:
- "Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces people, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within."³
- 77 3. The process of inculturating the Gospel of Jesus Christ within human culture is a form of *incarnation* of the Word of God in all the diversity of human experience, in which the Word of God comes to take up a dwelling place in the human family (Cf. Jn 1:14). When the Word of God becomes embedded in the heart of a culture, it is like a buried seed which draws its nourishment from the earth around it and grows to maturity. Inculturation can also be related to the *Paschal Mystery*: cultures, under the impact of the liberating power of the Gospel, rid themselves of their negative features and enter the freedom of God's Kingdom. The Gospel brings a prophetic challenge to every culture to remove all those things which inhibit the justice of the Kingdom. Inculturating the Gospel means allowing the Word of God to exercise a power within the lives of the people, without imposing, at the same time, alien cultural factors which would make it difficult for them truly to receive that Word. "Evangelization is not possible without inculturation. Inculturation is the existential dialogue between a living people and the living Gospel."⁴
- 78 4. This process has always been a part of the life of the Church: in the early Christian centuries the Church, while proclaiming its faith in ways that a Hellenistic culture could receive, was at the same time shaped by that culture. Insights which first originated outside the Jewish and Christian context came to find a place within the very heart of Christianity. A similar process is going on today in many parts of the world, as representatives of indigenous cultures, the great religious traditions and critical modernity bring insights which the Church must consider as part of the dialogue between Christian experience and the diversity of other

¹"Culture" means the way in which a group of people live, think, feel, organize themselves, celebrate and share life. In every culture, there are underlying systems of values, meanings and views of the world, which are expressed, visibly, in language, gestures, symbols, rituals and styles.

²Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 20.

³John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 52.

⁴Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, "Living People, Living Gospel," Address to the International Workshop on Native Ministry, Anishinabe, Canada, 12 October 1993.

experiences. In this way, the Church is recovering, in our times, the creativity shown in the early centuries and in the best of its evangelizing work.

- 79 5. Particular challenges must be faced today in order to enable an existential dialogue of this kind to take place with the range of cultures in which the Church is present:
- 80 5.1 – Contemporary secular culture, which has developed partly in opposition to the Church, often excludes religious faith from among its accepted values. Consequently, some cultures which were once shaped by Christian faith have, in differing degrees, turned away from Christianity towards a form of life in which the values of the Gospel are marginal. Religious belief is often dismissed as a disruptive source of social divisions which the human family has outgrown; in the eyes of many of our contemporaries the Church has no credibility as a commentator on human affairs.
- 81 5.2 – The great cultures of Asia, in spite of centuries of missionary activity, still do not regard Christian faith as a living presence at the heart of the Asian experience. In general, it is inseparably linked with a Western culture which they distrust. Many committed Christians in Asia feel a split between their Asian cultural experience and the still-Western character of what they experience in the Church.
- 82 5.3 – All over the world, the increasing pace of urbanization leads to impoverished millions in the great cities. These people are struggling with an agonizing cultural transition as they emigrate from rural areas and are forced to leave behind their traditional cultures. At the same time, this transition is producing a new cultural synthesis in which elements of traditional wisdom are woven into new forms of popular organization and celebration.
- 83 5.4 – Among indigenous people there has been a resurgence of consciousness of their distinctive cultures, and they must be supported with the liberating power of the Gospel.
- 84 5.5 – In Africa, there is a great desire to create a truly African Christianity, in which the Church and African cultures form an inseparable union. There is also a desire to free the Gospel from a colonial legacy which under-valued the quality of indigenous African cultural values, and to bring it into a more profound contact with African life.

Jesuit Mission and Culture

- 85 6. As Jesuits we live a faith directed towards the Kingdom, through which justice becomes a shaping reality in the world; we therefore bring the particular quality of that faith into dialogue with members of the religions and cultures of our contemporary world. We have said in the Decree "Servants of Christ's Mission" that "our mission of the service of faith and the promotion of justice must be broadened to include, as integral dimensions, proclamation of the Gospel, dialogue, and the evangelization of culture;"⁵ we have insisted on the inseparability of *justice, dialogue and the evangelization of culture*.
- 86 7. This is not just a pragmatic apostolic strategy; it is rooted in the mysticism flowing from the experience of Ignatius, which directs us simultaneously towards the mystery of God and the activity of God in his creation. Both in our personal lives of faith and in our ministries, it is never a question of choosing either God *or* the world; rather, it is always God *in* the world, labouring to bring it to perfection so that the world comes, finally, to be fully *in* God:⁶

⁵GC 34, D 2, n. 20.

⁶*SpEx* [235-237].

"Ignatius proclaims that for human beings there is no authentic search for God without an insertion into the life of the creation, and that, on the other hand, all solidarity with human beings and every engagement with the created world cannot be authentic without a discovery of God."⁷

- 87 8. The mission of the Society, in service to the Crucified and Risen Christ, is directed to the ways in which he makes his presence felt in the diversity of human cultural experiences, in order that we may present the Gospel as Christ's explicitly liberating presence. Ours must be a dialogue, born of respect for people, especially the poor, in which we share their cultural and spiritual values and offer our own cultural and spiritual treasures, in order to build up a communion of peoples instructed by God's Word and enlivened by the Spirit as at Pentecost. Our service of the Christian faith must never disrupt the best impulses of the culture in which we work, nor can it be an alien imposition from outside. It is directed towards working in such a way that the line of development springing from the heart of a culture leads it to the Kingdom.
- 88 9. In the exercise of our mission, we bring a simple criterion from our Ignatian tradition: in our personal lives of faith, we learn that we are in *consolation* when we are fully in touch with what God is doing in our hearts, and we are in *desolation* when our lives are in conflict with his action. So, too, our ministry of evangelizing culture will be a ministry of consolation when it is guided by ways that bring to light the character of God's activity in those cultures, and which strengthen our sense of the divine mystery. But our efforts will be misguided, and even destructive, when our activity runs contrary to the grain of his presence in the cultures which the Church addresses, or when we claim to exercise sole proprietorial rights over the affairs of God.
- 89 10. This intuition is what has led Jesuits to adopt such a positive approach to the religions and cultures in which they work. The early Jesuits, in their schools, linked Christian catechesis to an education in classical humanism, art and theatre, in order to make their students versed both in faith and in European culture. It is also what prompted Jesuits outside Europe to express a profound respect for indigenous cultures and to compose dictionaries and grammars of local languages, and pioneering studies of the people among whom they worked and whom they tried to understand.
- 90 11. Particularly at the present time, when the sensitive quality of so many indigenous cultures is threatened by powerful, but less benign, pressures, we want to recover a reverence for culture as exemplified by the best of our predecessors. Throughout the world, Jesuits are working with great numbers of ethnic groups, tribes and countries with traditional cultures. Theirs is a wonderful patrimony of culture, religion and ancient wisdom that has moulded their peoples' identities. These peoples are now struggling to affirm their cultural identity by incorporating elements of modern and global culture. We must do what we can to keep this relation between traditional cultures and modernity from becoming an imposition and try to make it a genuine intercultural dialogue. This would be a sign of liberation for both sides. Our intuition is that the Gospel resonates with what is good in each culture.
- 91 12. At the same time, we acknowledge that we have not always followed this intuition. We have not always recognized that aggression and coercion have no place in the preaching of the Gospel of freedom, especially in cultures which are vulnerable to manipulation by more powerful forces. In particular, we recognize that:

⁷Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Discourse to General Congregation 34, 6 January 1995; cf. Appendix II.2.

- 92 – We have often contributed to the alienation of the very people we wanted to serve.
- 93 – Jesuit evangelizers have often failed to insert themselves into the heart of a culture, but instead have remained a foreign presence.
- 94 – In our mission, we have failed to discover the treasures of humanity: the values, depth, and transcendence of other cultures, which manifest the action of the Spirit.
- 95 – We have sometimes sided with the "high culture" of the elite in a particular setting: disregarding the cultures of the poor and sometimes, by our passivity, allowing indigenous cultures or communities to be destroyed.
- 96 We acknowledge these mistakes, and now seek to profit from the cultural diversity and complexity within the apostolic body of the Society today. We realize that the process of inculturation is difficult yet progressive.
- 97 13. As the greater part of our men work within their own cultures, they will, in the service of faith, enter into dialogue with their own cultural world, witness to the creative and prophetic Spirit, and thus enable the Gospel to enrich these various cultures – and, in turn, be enriched by its inculturated presence in different contexts. We try to understand the reality of people's experience, because only then can the proclamation of the Gospel relate to their lives. We bring the Gospel into an open dialogue with the positive and negative elements that these cultures present. In this way, the Gospel comes to be seen in a new light: its meaning is enriched, renewed, even transformed by what these cultures bring to it. Father Pedro Arrupe drew attention to the importance of inculturation for the contemporary Jesuit mission:

"Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a 'new creation'."⁸

God's Dialogue with the world

- 98 14. The Gospel, God's prophetic word, continues the dialogue which God has begun with all men and women, who already share in *the mystery of unity* begun in creation.⁹ It brings them explicitly into contact with his *mystery of salvation*. God opens their hearts to the *mystery of fullness*, "through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ," which awaits the human family as its destiny.¹⁰
- 99 15. As disciples of the Risen Lord, we believe that his Paschal Mystery radiates throughout the whole of human history, touching every religion, every culture, and every person, including those who do not know him and those who, in conscience, cannot bring themselves to have faith in him. The centrality of the Paschal Mystery, *Gaudium et Spes* declares,

"applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is

⁸Pedro Arrupe, Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation, AR 17 (1978), p. 230.

⁹John Paul II, *Address on the Day of World Prayer at Assisi* (27 October 1986), AAS 79 (1987), pp. 865-871.

¹⁰*Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, 1991), n. 29.

secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God."¹¹

- 100** 16. How everyone shares in the Paschal Mystery is known to God; that they share in it is what the Church is led by God to believe. It is the Risen Christ who is constantly active in all dimensions of the world's growth, in its diversity of cultures and its varied spiritual experience. As there is a unified goodness in God's work of creation, so in Christ's redemptive work, the fragmentation caused by sin is being healed by a single thread of grace throughout the restored creation.
- 101** 17. One way of serving God's mystery of salvation is through dialogue, a spiritual conversation of equal partners, that opens human beings to the core of their identity. In such a dialogue, we come into contact with the activity of God in the lives of other men and women, and deepen our sense of this divine action: "By dialogue, we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God."¹² We try to enable people to become aware of God's presence in their culture and to help them evangelize others in their turn. The ministry of dialogue is conducted with a sense that God's action is antecedent to ours. We do not plant the seed of his presence for he has already done that in the culture; he is already bringing it to fruitfulness, embracing all the diversity of creation, and our role is to cooperate with this divine activity.
- 102** 18. The work of God in the diversity of human history is seen in the long process of enlightened human growth – still incomplete! – as expressed in religious, social, moral and cultural forms which bear the mark of the silent work of the Spirit. In the conceptions of the mind, in the habits of the heart, in the root-metaphors and values of all cultures – even, we might say, in the very process by which our physical bodies become capable of intense spiritual experience – God is preparing the conditions in his creatures for the loving acknowledgement of his truth, making them ready for the transformation promised in Christ. "All are called to a common destiny, the fullness of life in God."¹³

Our Mission and Critical Post-Modern Culture

- 103** 19. This is true even of those cultures where there is a difficult dialogue with men and women who think they have gone beyond Christianity or any religious commitment. We need to pay particular attention to them because of their influence throughout the world. Some cultures today are inclined so to restrict religious faith to the realm of the private and the personal, even regarding it as a strange eccentricity, that it is difficult for the Gospel to "animate, direct and unify" contemporary secular culture.¹⁴ We recognize that many of our contemporaries judge that neither Christian faith, nor any religious belief, is good for humanity.
- 104** 20. The problems of working in these contexts need no elaboration here, because the boundary line between the Gospel and the modern and post-modern culture passes through

¹¹Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

¹²John Paul II, "Address to the Leaders of Non-Christian Religions," (Madras, 5 February 1986), AAS 78 (1986), pp. 769 ff..

¹³*Dialogue and Proclamation, op. cit.*, n. 27.

¹⁴Pedro Arrupe, Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation, AR 17 (1978) 256-281.

the heart of each of us. Each Jesuit encounters the impulse to unbelief first of all in himself; it is only when we deal with that dimension in ourselves that we can speak to others of the reality of God. In addition, we cannot speak to others if the religious language we use is completely foreign to them: the theology we use in our ministry cannot ignore the vista of modern critical questions within which we too live. Only when we make sense of our own experience and understanding of God, can we say things which make sense to contemporary agnosticism.

- 105 21. This is a ministry which should not ignore the Christian mystical tradition that repeatedly treats of the wordless and imageless experience of God which surpasses human concepts: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus*, said Augustine.¹⁵ The experience of a silence surrounding the nature of God may be the starting point for many of our contemporaries, but it is also found within the depths of Christian experience and faith. There is a fragmentation of Christian faith in God in post-modern culture, in which human spirituality becomes detached from an explicitly religious expression. People's spiritual lives have not died; they are simply taking place outside the Church. "Post-Christian" culture witnesses, strangely and implicitly, to a reverence for the God who cannot be imaged by human beings without destroying the divine mystery: this is related to what Christians mean by "the Father." It also tries to find meaning within the very structure of human, embodied experience: this is related to the Christian belief that the "meaning" of the world (the "Logos") is made known to us in the humanity of Jesus. And there is a deep desire, expressed through a concern for the environment, to revere the natural order as a place where there is an immanent, but transcendent, presence: this connects with what Christians call the "Spirit."
- 106 22. The aim of an inculturated evangelization in post-Christian contexts is not to secularize or dilute the Gospel by accommodating it to the horizon of modernity, but to introduce the possibility and reality of God through practical witness and dialogue. We have to recognize that today humanity can find many answers in science which earlier generations could derive only from religion. In a predominantly secular context, our faith and our understanding of faith are often freed from contingent cultural complications and, as a result, purified and deepened.
- 107 23. A genuine attempt to work from within the shared experience of Christians and unbelievers in a secular and critical culture, built upon respect and friendship, is the only successful starting point. Our ministry towards atheists and agnostics will either be a meeting of equal partners in dialogue, addressing common questions, or it will be hollow. This dialogue will be based upon a sharing of life, a shared commitment to action for human development and liberation, a sharing of values and a sharing of human experience.¹⁶ Through dialogue, modern and post-modern cultures may be challenged to become more open to approaches and experiences which, though rooted in human history, are new to them. At the same time theology, when developed with an eye to contemporary critical culture, may help people discover the limits of immanence and the human necessity of transcendence.
- 108 24. We need to recognize that the Gospel of Christ will always provoke resistance; it challenges men and women and requires of them a conversion of mind, heart and behaviour. It is not difficult to see that a modernist, scientific-technological culture, too often one-sidedly rationalistic and secular in tone, can be destructive of human and spiritual values. As Ignatius makes clear in the Meditation on Two Standards, the call of Christ is always radically opposed to values which refuse spiritual transcendence and promote a pattern of selfish life. Sin is social in its expression, as is the counter-witness offered by grace: unless a Christian life distinctly differs from the values of secular modernity, it will have nothing special to offer. One of the most important contributions we can make to critical contemporary culture is to

¹⁵St Augustine, *Sermo* 117, PL 38, 663.

¹⁶*Dialogue and Proclamation, op. cit.*, n. 42.

show that the structural injustice in the world is rooted in value-systems promoted by a powerful modern culture which is becoming global in its impact.

Change and Hope

- 109 25. It is part of our Jesuit tradition to be involved in the transformation of every human culture, as human beings begin to reshape their patterns of social relations, their cultural inheritance, their intellectual projects, their critical perspectives on religion, truth and morality, their whole scientific and technological understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. We commit ourselves to accompany people, in different contexts, as they and their culture make difficult transitions. We commit ourselves to develop the dimension of an inculturated evangelization within our mission of the service of faith and the promotion of justice.
- 110 26. "Ignatius loved the great cities;" they were where this transformation of the human community was taking place, and he wanted Jesuits to be involved in the process. The "city" can be for us the symbol of our current efforts to bring fulfilment to human culture. That the project, in its present form, is seriously flawed, no one doubts; that we are more skeptical now than we were even thirty years ago is true; that there have been massive dislocations and inequalities is clear to all; that the totalitarian experiments of this century have been brutal and almost demonic in intensity, none will dispute; that it seems sometimes to resemble the Babel and Babylon of the Bible is all too evident. But our aim is the confused but inescapable attempt to cooperate in the creation of that community which, according to the Book of Revelation, God will bring about – and God *will* bring it about – in the form of the holy city, the radiant New Jerusalem: "By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day – and there shall be no night there. They shall bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations" (Rev 21:24-26). Until that day arrives, our vocation is to work generously with the Risen Christ in the all-too-human city where there is poverty of body and spirit, domination and control, manipulation of mind and heart; and to serve the Lord there until he returns to bring to perfection the world in which he died.

Perspectives

- 111 27.1 We must recognize the complexities of achieving a fully inculturated evangelization within the life of a people; while all our ministries have to be conducted with an awareness of their cultural dimension, the inculturation of the Gospel may be slow simply because cultural changes are slow.
- 112 27.2 We must recognize that our world is increasingly aware of the rights as well as the diversity of cultures, and that each cultural group is properly asserting the qualities of its heritage. We need to respect these diverse cultures in their self-affirmation and to work along with them creatively.
- 113 27.3 In every ministry, we must recognize that the salvific work of God's revelation is already present in every culture and that God will bring it to completion.
- 114 27.4 We must remember that we do not directly "evangelize cultures;" we evangelize people in their culture. Whether we are working in our own culture or in another, as servants of the Gospel we must not impose our own cultural structures, but witness to the creativity of

the Spirit which is also at work in others. Ultimately, the people of a culture are the ones who root the Church and the Gospel in their lives.

- 115** 27.5 All of us need to recognize that every large culture contains within it a range of ethnic cultures and new sub-cultures which are often ignored.
- 116** 27.6 The call to inculturated evangelization is not simply for those working in a land other than their own. All of our works take place in a particular cultural setting with positive and negative features which the Gospel must touch.
- 117** 27.7 We need to listen carefully when people say that the Gospel does not speak to them, and begin to understand the cultural experience behind this statement. Does what we say, and what we do, correspond to the real and urgent needs of the people around us in their relationship to God and to others? If the answer is negative, then perhaps we are not fully engaged in the lives of the people we serve.

Guidelines

- 118** 28. To further the Society's ability to promote inculturation, we offer the following guidelines:
- 119** 28.1 Our option for the poor should reach out also to their cultures and values, often based on a rich and fruitful tradition. This will permit a creative and mutual respect within societies, and the promotion of a more fertile cultural and religious atmosphere.
- 120** 28.2 The lifestyle of Jesuit communities should bear credible witness to the counter-cultural values of the Gospel so that our service of faith can effectively transform the patterns of local culture.
- 121** 28.3 Our commitment to social justice and ongoing human development must focus on transforming the cultural values which sustain an unjust and oppressive social order.
- 122** 28.4 Each stage of our formation programmes should root us in the cultures of the people we serve. They should focus on sharing the life and experience of those people, and on trying to understand the culture from within.
- 123** 28.5 There must be an integration of the dynamic of inculturation and the apostolic renewal both of Jesuits and of those who work with us. This is essential for our own conversion of heart, and for a rediscovery of the freshness of the Gospel through its dialogue with culture.
- 124** 28.6 An experience of a culture other than our own will help us grow into a vision more open to what is universal and more objective about our own native cultures.
- 125** 28.7 Our educational institutions, in particular, have a crucial role to play in linking Christian faith to the core elements in contemporary and traditional cultures.
- 126** 28.8 We commit ourselves to the creation of genuinely "local churches" which can contribute to the richness of the universal communion of the Church of Christ. We will also look for ways of creating indigenous theology, liturgy and spirituality, and of promoting the right and freedom of peoples to encounter the Gospel without being alienated from their culture.
- 127** 28.9 As an international apostolic body, the Society is uniquely able to draw upon a range

of cultural experience in its ministries and to promote an inter-cultural dialogue, contributing in this way to the Church's mission, at the service of God's plan to bring together all peoples into the communion of his Kingdom (Eph 1:10; 2 Cor 5:19).