

Mission and Inculturation of the Gospel in Father Kolbe: Theory and Practice

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The term “inculturation” does not appear in the writings of our Saint. The term is more modern and at that time did not belong to the theological and missionary vocabulary of his times. It seems to have been used for the first time towards the year 1977. While it is not only limited to the *missiones ad gentes*, it is mainly used in this context. The specific missionary activity is destined to the people and the groups who do not know Christ yet, and to places where the Gospel has not influenced the culture yet.

We must not forget that Saint Maximilian Kolbe was a missionary, he traveled to Siberia, Vietnam (Saigon), Singapore, China, India, Korea and mainly Japan, where he is still remembered, as I personally found out. In April 1930, the first missionaries of the Friars Minor Conventuals arrive at Nagasaki, and Fr Kolbe begins his contacts with the Japanese culture. He teaches philosophy in the diocesan seminary and this possibility of teaching philosophy at Nagasaki helps the bishop receive permission for Kolbe to remain in this city. He returns to Poland two times for a short period of time (June-July 1930 and May-July 1932), and then from October 1933 to June 1936 he is once again working in Japan, as the Superior of the Franciscan mission opening a minor seminary. The spreading of the magazine *Mugenzai-no Seibo-no Kishi* (The Knight of the Immaculate) begins here in Nagasaki.

Fr. Kolbe had an intellectual training, which partially explains his approach to the theme of inculturation. Along with his degree in philosophy earned at the Gregorian and the Theology degree from the Pontifical Theological Faculty “St. Bonaventure” (today called the Seraphicum), he dedicated three years to teaching philosophical courses: *Logica Maior*, *Logica Minor*, *Theodicea* (1930-32), as well as theology courses (1932-1936), in the diocesan Seminary of Nagasaki. We must not forget this aspect.

How Fr. Kolbe saw the «mission» and «inculturation» will be explained further on, in the section on his “theory” of mission and inculturation. We will be surprised by some of his theological intuitions. He explains the mission in the light of God’s love who sends His Son and the Holy Spirit for the salvation and sanctification of men and of the world. And at the same time, he uses the term “a return to God”, a contemporary Bible vocabulary; and in this return, the missionary Church leads to Christ: the Creation, the cultural values and the cultures; and from Christ to the Father.

Within this context, a particular reflection on the Immaculate comes to mind.

We must not forget that the term and the concept of “civilization” has given way to the term of culture, in the sense that in the field of cultural anthropology became conscious of its humanistic function. Culture illuminates the truly human dimensions of progress and guides the Church in her orientations on evangelization.

Objectively, «inculturation» means to bring the force of the Gospel into the heart of culture and cultures, attempting to recognize their essential characteristics, respecting the specific values and riches. It means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values by integration with Christianity. At the end, all these values will be useful for reformulating the Gospel. Subjectively, «inculturation» is first of all an attitude of the apostle and the missionary heart, achieved in a process of love for men and for their cultures, starting from certain cultural discoveries. It is a slow process, supported by dynamism and by the missionary enthusiasm.

In Fr. Kolbe, we can find a vision of mission and inculturation in the light of God's love; as we shall see, a universal love that touches upon creatures and cultures, giving them the ability of being assumed. At the same time, there are many discoveries to be made, examples of the "practice of inculturation" of our Fr. Kolbe. Perhaps the first is the discovery of the value of indigenous clergy and religious persons, within their own cultural context, to carry on the ecclesial mission of the Archdiocese of Gniezno; real cultural proposals, direct experiences he intends to accept.

In his letters from Japan or in his commentaries, we cannot find any negative thoughts about the men and the culture of the new country he is living and working in, even if Japan is going through difficult negative moments during that particular period of preparation to war, the Second World War. Apart from mentioning that "a column of vehicles is passing with soldiers: 24 thousand" in his diary, Kolbe doesn't add anything else.

"I was very impressed – he writes – by the appeal by His Exc. Archbishop Salotti about the Pontifical work of St. Peter the Apostle [and quotes the ecclesial monthly from the Archdiocese of Gniezno and Poznan, 49 (1934) 289-296, no.10]. The emphasis on the indigenous clergy's need according to the wishes of the Apostolic See and the listing of the reasons for the European clergy's small harvest despite enormous efforts are true in mission lands. This is no different even for the Order. Only the Japanese can develop this in Japan, not us foreigners... For this reason, I believe that we should not build a religious Province here in Japan with our [Polish] fathers and brothers, rather, we should be the seed that must be used to form the native religious persons according to our spirit. Only they can develop the action".

And in fact, a few years later in 1969, the Japanese mission became a regular religious Province of the Friars Minor Conventuals, named the "Province of the Immaculate". Japanese religious persons now govern all the convents.

One immediately sees the missionary's intuition, supported by experience. True, he remembers something written by Mons. Salotti. He must have met Salotti the two times he passed through Rome, where the Archbishop was the Secretary of the Congregation Propaganda Fide (from 1930 to 1935). The secretary was a fervent writer

and we still maintain his thinking on the need for indigenous clergy and on the reasons for their development even today.

He immediately looked for a place for the Conventual Brothers in the Seminary of Tokyo, accurately examining the conditions of life and studies in this seminary.

Concretely, for Fr. Kolbe the missionary ideal consists in guaranteeing the “salvation and the sanctification of all through the Immaculate”. The memory of the Immaculate, always present in his writings, belongs to his particular charisma, the specific inheritance of the Franciscan tradition. The “salvation of all” – as often repeated - and of all that is in relation to all men. The *soteriological dimension* is the one most emphasized. “Therefore, the most perfect salvation and sanctification of the most number of souls that Jesus redeemed... must be *our sublime ideal of life...*”.

The *ecclesiological dimension* is also present as the foundation for the mission and for inculturation. Saint Maximilian wrote, “We should not forget that Poland and Japan are not the only ones to exist under the sun, there is an even greater number of hearts beating beyond the boundaries of these nations”.

Another foundation for his missionary concept is the *Franciscan vocation*. In one of his first letters from Nagasaki, he writes: “Father Saint Francis is the missionary model; his example, his Rule are highly missionary and allow for the greatest apostolic impulse directed towards salvation and sanctification of souls”.

Apart from the work in training the indigenous clergy and religious persons, which presupposes love and respect for the people, we can find another aspect of inculturation in Fr. Kolbe’s commitment to learn the Japanese language.

“According to a local custom – the Saint tells us in a letter – a missionary may go to work only after having studied the Japanese language for three years and after having taken an exam. Therefore, these three years may be attended along with Theology”.

These three years studying the language seem to outline Fr. Kolbe’s studying plans. He had heard from some Chinese seminarians, while still in Rome, that in some countries in Asia, especially in China, two forms of language are used, one for speaking with the cultured classes and another for the popular classes. He made the choice of learning the popular one:

“Given this situation, even if our missionaries will study ‘Mandarin’ Chinese [the cultured one], I decided to publish the Chinese *Knight* in the language of the people. I was telling my dear Oriental friends: “the Jesuit Fathers and others may work for the cultured classes in the ‘Mandarin’ language, instead we will go among the people with the *Knight* written in the language of the people, just like one of them...”.

The choice of the popular language has a pastoral meaning, and at the same time an inculturating one, just to speak like one of the people.

That Fr. Kolbe learned the Japanese language well and had a deep respect for the language can be deduced from various factors. First of all the publication and distribution of the *Mugenzai no seibo no Kishi*, often quoted by Fr. Kolbe with the term *Knight*, which is the English translation of the Japanese *Kishi*. During his first months in Japan, the *Kishi* remains the center of his attention and he speaks about it in all his letters. Many issues of this review are still available to us, where we can find a simple but perfect language. True, he could immediately count on the collaboration of some Japanese, very good with languages, such as Professor Yamaki Yoshio. He was a Methodist and taught in a school in Sendai. He would write Fr. Kolbe: "The best translator for Japanese for the 'Knight' is now a Protestant Japanese, who already wishes to convert". Therefore very soon the Knight would become "the greatest Catholic periodical in Japan and many pagans and even bonzes (pagan priests) receive it on a regular basis". He would then note: "There are over twenty bonzes among the readers of the *Kishi* up to now". He would then go on to explain that the "bonze" is not a pagan priest, since in Buddhism does not contain a priestly dimension. Instead he is a Buddhist monk, living his own rule in the monasteries. The years go by and Fr. Kolbe studies the Japanese religions even closer, and his information became even more exact:

"The Buddhist monk abandons the domestic hearth and his possessions to destroy his nature and kill the germs of future existence in it, annihilating himself in ecstasy and achieving Nirvana (the void)".

Detachment from the family and possessions will destroy the germs of reincarnation in his nature and will allow him to achieve Nirvana or the "void". This description corresponds better to the *Zen* or *Shingon* sects; however not forgetting the *Pure Earth* sects when mentioning the Buddhist *rosary*, so similar to ours, which the Buddhists use repeating the name of Amida to obtain salvation. He even knows about the new religions born in Japan during more recent times such as the *Omoto-kyō* and the *Tenri-kyō* religions.

When Fr. Kolbe had a better grasp of the language, he immediately put himself to the work of evangelization, and in this context we find some interesting aspects to study in the light of inculturation. In his correspondence, we cannot find any sign of a blind or polemic method of proselytism. Along with the witness of life, in reality the life of the poor, he uses the "dialogue" with the Buddhist bonzes and with other Japanese. This dialogue or "mondō" (Japanese Buddhist term) was the same method used by Saint Francis Xavier with the same Japanese Buddhists, and even earlier by Saint Francis of Assisi with the Muslims. This dialogue presupposes an attitude of respect: once, Fr. Kolbe, speaking to a noble and educated Japanese who "had expressed the idea that religions are different and each one bears a little truth, on my part I did not deny this".

First of all, Fr. Kolbe wanted to study Buddhism. The Bishop of Kyoto, Mons. Furuya Yoshiyuki, had shown him some texts on Buddhism encouraging him to go to

Kyoto «to speak to the university professors there. The Bishop says: 'Kyoto is the Rome of Buddhism'». From now on we will find sentences such as this one in his writings: "Not long ago, I was speaking to a Buddhist bonze from Nagasaki". This is a conversation – watch for this word! – that leads to mutual enrichment. "Among other things – he continues – I came to the knowledge that according to Buddhist beliefs, the dead return on this world to help men, then die again and return again", and he continues with a specific reflection. Another day, this time within a Shinto temple, Fr. Kolbe remembers that while "conversing with a bonze about the goddess Amaterasu, I asked if she had parents...". Let's look at another example where he uses the same word and one can see the fruits of a respectful attitude: "Not long ago a pagan bonze came to visit us. We spoke at length about religious truths. He promised to come see us often. He confessed to not being convinced in Buddhism, he had only become a bonze because his father is a bonze. You could tell that he was sincerely looking for the truth".

Fr. Kolbe's interest for the modern *means of social communication* and the attempts to use them is well known. Even if he only managed to find success in the field of the press. Some of his pages dedicated to the press even have great philosophical value. "All the means, all the recent novelties regarding the machinery or the work systems should be placed at the service of the work of sanctification [and of salvation] of souls through the Immaculate". This practical dimension was first of all the fruit of a theory we will present now, also corresponding to Fr. Kolbe's character. In one of his first letter from 1924, he confesses:

"As for the program of activities, my previous experience taught me to not restrict myself to rules or norms too much, rather to make room for greater spontaneity in projects and intentions".

Psychologically, this spontaneity means creativity.

Up until now, we have presented the "practice" of inculturation, now we should study more deeply the **theory** of mission and mainly inculturation according to Fr. Kolbe's thinking, which is the second aspect of our conference.

Thanks to inculturation, the Gospel must take on all the positive values contained in traditions, uses, religions and peoples' cultures, as we are taught by the decree on missions by Vatican II. All these elements will be precious for re-formulating the Gospel, the liturgy and theology in the new cultures. Inculturation proceeds in three stages:

- assuming,
- transformation and
- bearing fruit in a new synthesis such as reformulation.

What are the theoretical foundations of this movement, inherent to inculturation? This theology presupposes that at the source, above everything else, is the love of God who created all things with love, and everything remains oriented towards Christ and His Gospel. A pervading direction, despite the fact that Creation was blemished by sin. Many

of humanity's cultural and religious elements, behind which lie the love of God and His secret presence, were also blemished and must be freed before being taken and assumed by the Church.

In Christology, in the incarnation of the Son of God, we can find a tangible example of inculturation. He was made man; He was made flesh with all man's qualities, minus sin (Heb 4:15). Even the already mentioned aspect of freeing, characteristic of any inculturation, is present in Christ's Paschal Mystery, which passes to life through death on the cross (Eph 2:6 et segue). The cross is the turning point of the process of inculturation.

The cross has always been present in Fr. Kolbe's missionary activities.

We shall read some texts by Saint Maximilian Kolbe now that demonstrate the theoretical foundations of his work for inculturation, some already mentioned:

"God is love [1 Jn 4:16]. In the fullness of this life, the Father generates the Son, while the Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son. But since God loved the possible finite similarities of Himself, He chose some of these and gave them a true and unique existence. By force, almost as a reaction, these creatures tend towards God in the same way, however what imperfections are they subjected to! How discordant from God's Will are they, from the Divine itself?"

Men and all the creatures proceed from the love of God the Creator, they "tend" towards God but need to be freed because they are subjected to so much imperfection. This is where culture enters, which has good and positive aspects because they proceed from the love of God, and negative aspects – the fruits of sin that must be purified.

The "mission" comes into this context, as the force to carry forth inculturation, accepting everything, freeing everything and orienting everything towards Christ and the Creator.

"The reason for Creation, the finality of man is the love of God, Creator and Father; an ever greater love, the divinization, the return to God from where he had come, the union with God, a fruitful love".

The finality of creation and mission is presented as a love of God and towards God, from God the Creator and Father, which overcomes any simple form of love to become true divinization, or participation in the Divine life of God. And thus a "return" to the Father, as Christ Himself explained at the Last Supper, at the moment of supreme love, "But now, I am going to He who sent Me" (Jn 16:5). This love is full of apostolic fruitfulness. These are all Fr. Kolbe's significant expressions. Like this other one:

"That love towards the Father may become even more perfect, infinitely more perfect, is why the love of the Son, Jesus, was made manifest. He who came down on earth, died on the cross and remained in the Eucharist, to re-awaken love towards Him in the hearts".

The Paschal dimension of Christ's Mystery is evident in these words. The text ends by remembering:

“And, like the love of God towards Creation, which descends on earth from the Father through the Son and the Spirit, thus through the Spirit and the Son the answer to this love, the reaction, the love of Creation ascends to the Father”.

The source of mission and love are in the Father; the descending paths are the Son and the Spirit; the fruit of the mission rises to God by the ascending way, which is the Son and the Spirit.

In the excerpt quoted, we can discover the Kolbian concept about Mary, not only as the Immaculate, but also as the crowning of Creation. Because the creatures' answer-peak to the calling of Divine love is unattainable, Mary anticipates the victory by the Divine Plan of Creation. Mary has never let us down, in Her person all Creation answered with such zeal to the calling of God's love so as to attract, almost, the Son of God on earth. And at the same time, She carries all the creatures towards their own perfection.

Now we will present another point, fundamental to inculturation, which is confirmed by Fr. Kolbe's pneumatology.

The Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (number 28) recalls, “The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. [...] Again, it is the Spirit who sows the ‘seeds of the Word’ present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ”. Therefore the Spirit's work does not only aim at sanctifying souls, but also touches upon cultures, “preparing them for full maturity in Christ”.

According to Fr. Kolbe's thinking, the Holy Spirit is not only “the Immaculate's Spouse”, “almost incarnate in the Immaculate”. He is much more. One could say that He presents His theology of the Spirit, as the descending love of God and the ascending way that leads all creatures towards the Church, towards Christ and ultimately towards God, thus tracing the possibility for the work of inculturation since cultures are under His dynamic influence. And thanks to the Spirit one can achieve the phenomenon of inculturation, which we have defined as assuming the cultural values in the Gospel to be able to reformulate our message with new categories.

One day, thanks to the Spirit, Incarnation was achieved; today, thanks to the Spirit, the Mystery of Incarnation continues to be achieved, which is inculturation.

Another theological point Fr. Kolbe presents, to discover and accept many elements of Creation, of nature, as good and positive, which become the mediation for the process of inculturation, is *the order of Creation, the order of creatures*, the fruit of God the Omnipotent. Thus, he finds himself in harmony with Vatican II when it says: “Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature”. The Council document continues by explaining what it means by the term “culture”, a complex reality going from the means man uses to develop and perfect his many qualities, or to strive to bring the world itself under his control

through his knowledge and labor, or to make social life more human, or to express great spiritual experiences in his works.

An entire article by Fr. Kolbe, written in Japanese in *Seibo no Kishi* (1934), develops the theme of the order of Creation, which opens the way to a positive approach to Creation and to culture, discovering the presence of a knowledgeable Creator full of love behind it. And concludes: "I am not capable of believing that a God who is omniscient, omnipotent, the highest good and sole creator of all things does not exist. Wouldn't it be strange, rather prodigious, unthinkable, if this world, for example the mountains, the rivers, the fields, the valleys, the trees, the grass, the sun, the moon, the stars, the dogs, the cats and finally man, who defines himself as the 'lord, master of creation', if we did not know where all these things came from, who made them? [...] It is not possible that all these and other similar things, visible in this world, come from purely casual sources. One thing is certain, fortuity, as we can see, is intrinsically a lack of order..."

The proof of the existence of the soul and its spiritual activities, knowledge itself, comes from this order. This order is also the foundation for all abilities and possibilities that we have to work for inculturation. "We know God especially through the effects, from creatures", Saint Maximilian underlines. This is not a simply abstract, theoretical "knowledge" since culture offers the means to express a true and profound spiritual experience, as clarified by the text cited from the Council when it defines the meaning of "culture", and, in consequence, of inculturation.

Here we can pause to reflect on a new dimension of culture, so dear to Fr. Kolbe, open to contemplation when facing Creation, the order of creatures. Let us leave the *rational* line that we have presented until now, the fruit of his intellectual training, to look at the spiritual line, the *mystic* line. Again, Vatican II guides us: "culture offers us the means to express a true and profound religious experience". This is the *cosmic prayer*, as it has been called.

Prayer is not only individual, nor only human. All of nature and all the creatures have been included in the chorus of the lauds to glorify God. Many Psalms recall the creatures and invite them to pray with us. The Franciscan tradition discovered companions to pray and praise God in the creatures. We should recall the Cantic of Creatures by Saint Francis, where the creatures are called sisters, brothers, friends. The mystics are not insensitive to nature, they marvel and take advantage of these close creatures to express their great experiences of God.

Inculturation finds its place in this line of thought.

Fr. Kolbe lived this experience. Going back to his childhood, he recalls with admiration the magnificent nature of Poland, and feels he is invited to glorify the Lord: "Among the mountain slopes and along the vast plains, the Polish forests weightily rustle: they are beautiful for their freshness, for their greenness, for their majesty and with their mysterious whisperings they proclaim the glory of their Creator. However, they are not content with this, they wish to incite the love of God even in men". He is enthusiastic when contemplating the mountains in the nations he travels through, like the Pyrenees, the

Alps, the Vesuvius, those in China or Malacca. And as can be expected, how can he forget the Japanese landscapes, from the snow in the north to the spring with its blossoming trees, which he contemplated in Nagasaki. “When on a beautiful evening – he writes – we look at the twinkling stars, spontaneously a question insinuates itself in our mind: What lies beyond all of this? [...] Who, therefore, can answer this? Only He whose intelligence is infinite [...]; and this is only God Himself”. Looking at all the creatures, he can but pray and love God: “I see and admire Your creatures, I thank You and I love You, but they are not enough for me as You well know”.

This final sentence gives us an insight into the authentic mystic experience of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, the fruit of his ability to contemplate creatures.

Even if synthetically, we have studied all the aspects of inculturation that we have found in the writings and in the life of Fr. Kolbe. We have always used the theology of inculturation, as it is presented today by the Magisterium, as the starting point. Although our theme is very concrete, the presence of the Immaculate could not be missing from our exposition. And the presence of love, which our Saint demonstrated through the supreme gift of his life for others. In illustrious and great figures such as the Saints, many different aspects come together and are well connected in the harmony of personality. Thus on this study on inculturation, we find a precursor, a companion who will help us in Father Kolbe.

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