

Inculturation of the Eucharistic Liturgy in India

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The sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are meant to be symbolic rituals and opportunities to experience spiritual realities. However, they often fail to accomplish this lofty goal due to many factors that combine and contribute to the diminution of the experience of the spiritual, and hence the faith and hope that comes from that experience, causing many to move away from the liturgical traditions, to more evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

Lubin asserts that “recent studies of ritual have shown how ritual activity, by its seeming invariability and formalism, can have a compelling impact on its audience,” and quotes an earlier anthropologist, Clifford Geertz as saying that the purpose of such rituals and ceremonies is “to present an ontology and, by presenting it, to make it happen – make it actual.”¹ The Eucharistic liturgy is filled with symbolic rituals and signs which, to most Catholics, are incomprehensible, arcane and useless, even “frigid” as Guardini puts it:

The restraint characteristic of the liturgy is at times very pronounced, making this form of prayer appear at first as a frigid intellectual production, until we gradually grow familiar with it and realize what vitality pulsates in the clear, measured forms....²

However, as Timothy Radcliffe, OP, says, “the ‘huge event’ of the Eucharist works in our lives in ways that are profound but often barely noticeable and hardly register as experiences at all.”³

Throughout the history of Christianity, some symbols have held an important place in the practice of the faith, such as water, bread and wine, oils, the white garment of baptism, etc. Over time, much of the symbolism and the meaning of the accompanying rituals have been lost, due to

¹ Timothy Lubin, "Veda on parade: revivalist ritual as civic spectacle", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (69, no. 2, June 2001), 379.

² Heinz R. Kuehn, *The Essential Guardini: An Anthology of the Writings of Romano Guardini* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997), 142.

³ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why go to Church: the Drama of the Eucharist* (London: Continuum, 2008), 6.

several factors that caused the petrification and stagnation of these symbols and rituals until recently, when it was discovered that there were actually several layers to each of these symbols and rituals. This discovery led to some liturgical reform after the second Vatican Council, but nearly half a century after the changes were initiated, there is still a significant lack of adult education and formation in the faith.

The Eucharistic liturgy is variously called “a drama”⁴, “heaven on earth”⁵ and a sacrifice. It is the central element of Roman Catholic worship with the sacrament of the Eucharist as the “source and summit” of Christian life, within and towards which the other sacraments are celebrated. The pivotal role of the Eucharist and the liturgy is expressed in a particularly beautiful way by Teilhard de Chardin:

It is first by the Incarnation and next by the Eucharist that Christ organizes us for himself and imposes himself upon us. By his Incarnation he inserted himself not just into humanity but into the universe which supports humanity.⁶

As a gift, the Eucharist has no equal, and the liturgy that celebrates it must be an expression of the response of the individuals and the community receiving the gift. This way of giving and receiving/responding points to a profound relationship, and as Cavalletti says, “The relationship between God and humankind is ‘condensed’ . . . in a particular way in the liturgy and, most of all, in the celebration of the Eucharist.”⁷

⁴ Radcliffe, *Why go to Church?: The Drama of the Eucharist*, 7.

⁵ Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999).

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Blanche Marie Gallagher, *Meditations with Teilhard de Chardin*, (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1988), 136.

⁷ Sofia Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy: elementary reflections* (Chicago, IL: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1998), 93.

Even though the liturgy is universal, it is also individual, and each local community deserves to celebrate this moment in a way that is most meaningful to it, in a way that forms the community as God's people growing in His love. As Radcliffe rightly observes:

All our experiences of what it means to be alive, to find and lose meaning, to delight and suffer, are all illuminated by the Eucharist and illuminate it in turn. It is the sacrament of our joy, freedom and hope.⁸

In any celebration, "the words, acts and gestures point to the reality being celebrated and thus become 'signs.' Through these 'signs' the reality is expressed and lived."⁹ The liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, as mentioned above, is also rife with these 'signs'. By virtue of pointing to something deeper, these signs ought not to be "mere rituals" but life giving acts of worship and love. As Sofia Cavalletti says:

All liturgy . . . makes real that type of *cosmic breathing* through which we receive everything from God and everything returns to God. This is true especially of the eucharist: The ritual makes us see this dynamism between heaven and earth by means of certain gestures.¹⁰

In order to make these gestures and signs and rituals more evocative, thus making the response to the gift of the Eucharist more real, the liturgy has to be adapted to the culture and language of the local community, or inculturated, because it is of utmost importance that "rather than remain a spectator at Christ's sacrifice, we are to become, together with him, an active participant in it."¹¹ And to become an active participant, and allow God's grace to work through the liturgy, the

⁸ Radcliffe, *Why go to Church?: The Drama of the Eucharist*, 13.

⁹ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child 6 to 12 years old: A Description of an Experience* (Oak Park, IL: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2002), 58.

¹⁰ Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy*, 94.

¹¹ Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy*, 91.

symbolisms used must be closer to home, rather than ‘imported’.

As Christianity spread into non-European countries, one of the most important issues facing the missionaries was that of the indigenous culture of the people. In the past, the Church refused to recognize it as a significant factor in the life of the faithful, and insisted on conformity to the uniform liturgical practices of Europe, even as the Anglican Church in India was trying to have some changes in the liturgy approved at the Lambeth conference of 1920. The bishop of Bombay, the Rt. Rev. Edwin James Palmer, in his preface to the book submitted for approval asks this significant question:

The varieties of national temperament seem to demand varieties of liturgical expression. Whence then comes the insistence on uniformity which is so familiar to us both in our own Church and in the Roman Communion?¹²

The changes that were sought in this book was approved and implemented by 1923 by the Anglican Diocese of Bombay¹³, while the Roman liturgy remained the same until after the Second Vatican Council. By the second half of the twentieth century, it became clear to Rome that cultural practices could not be ignored and that the liturgy would have to be modified to make worship more intelligible, natural and ‘sacramental’ to each of the many local communities in India.

This initiated much study into the surrounding religions and customs of the people in these non-European countries and after Vatican II, led to much experimentation in the liturgy.

¹² Jack Copley Winslow, *The Eucharist in India: a plea for a distinctive liturgy for the Indian church* (London: Longmans, Green, 1920), xviii.

¹³ David J. Kennedy, *Eucharistic Sacramentality in an Ecumenical Context: The Anglican Epiclesis* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 196.

This brought a realization that many of the rituals of the indigenous people provided individuals with similar spiritual experiences that the Catholic sacraments were meant to do. In this paper, I will examine the some of the similarities between some Hindu rituals and ceremonies in the tribal regions of Southern Gujarat in Western India, and the Eucharistic liturgy of the Roman Church.

When missionaries took a very European Roman liturgical ceremony and theology to other parts of the world, it posed some very difficult problems for both the missionaries and the new converts. In the post-Vatican II period, the influence of multiple cultures in the Western liturgy and sacramental practices has been more readily recognized¹⁴ and an attempt at engaging the local communities is being made. This inculturation of the sacramental rituals, especially that of the Eucharistic liturgy, is an ongoing, challenging and controversial process. There is a need to maintain the balance between the invariance of the liturgical ritual and a certain multivalence in the expression of the spiritual reality that is experienced in the liturgy.

Until the 20th century, inculturation was a natural and imperceptible process, but now it is a more deliberate process that involves study and discernment in most cases. According to Anscar Chupungco, OSB, inculturation can be defined as:

a process whereby pertinent elements of a local culture are integrated into the worship of the local Church. . . . Inculturation properly understood and rightly executed will lead the assembly to a profound appreciation of Christ's mystery made present in the liturgy

¹⁴ Long before Vatican II, Romano Guardini wrote: "Not less rich is the liturgy's cultural heritage . . . many centuries have cooperated in its formation and have bequeathed to it their best. They have fashioned its language; expanded its ideas and conceptions in every direction; developed its beauty and construction down to the smallest detail." (Kuehn, *The Essential Guardini: An Anthology of the Writings of Romano Guardini*, 143); Anscar Chupungco, "<http://www.valpo.edu/ils/assets/pdfs/chupungco1.pdf>." 2003, (accessed December 2009); and Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist*, (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 2008)

through the dynamism of cultural signs and symbols . . . aims to deepen the spiritual life of the assembly through a fuller experience of Christ who is revealed in the people's language, rites, arts and symbols.¹⁵

However, Fr. Chupungco cautions that clear boundaries must be set with regard

to the incursion of culture in Christian worship. Failure to do this could lead to a situation where violence is done to biblical doctrine in order to accommodate culture. It could also happen that the cultural elements that are integrated in worship overly evoke their cultural provenance and thus divert attention from the Christian rite or worse send an altogether different message to the assembly.¹⁶

In the region of southern Gujarat, which is close to the mouth of the River Tapi and the Arabia Sea, in the area of Zhankvav, about a hundred miles northeast of Surat are about 48 villages in which live the people from the tribes of Gamit, Kokana and Vasava in moderately forested regions, and depending on agriculture for their livelihood. They were converted to Christianity by the Jesuits about 45-50 years ago, and thus they represent the 'new Church' which has in many ways connected to the 'ancient Church' in their liturgical celebrations and ways of initiation. The Jesuits who work with them have adapted the Eucharistic liturgy in such a way as to bring out and make real the doctrines in the Eucharistic celebration. Since the concept of the Eucharist as a sacrifice is most prominent in this local culture, the Eucharist is compared to the Hindu sacrificial ritual – the *yajna*.

The Monier-Williams dictionary defines *yajna* as “worship, devotion, prayer, praise, act of worship or devotion, offering, oblation and sacrifice” and notes that the latter meanings of sacrifice became prevalent only in post-Vedic times.¹⁷ On the whole, one can easily find

¹⁵Chupungco, "http://www.valpo.edu/ils/assets/pdfs/chupungco1.pdf.", 2.

¹⁶ Chupungco, "http://www.valpo.edu/ils/assets/pdfs/chupungco1.pdf.", 3.

¹⁷*Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary*, <http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/index.php?sfx=pdf> (accessed December 2009), 839.

parallels between performing a *yajna* and actively participating in the Eucharist. In the *yajna* a fire is the central element into which offerings, including ghee (clarified butter), rice, milk, herbs and incense, are poured along with the recitation of verses from the Vedas. This is comparable to the burnt offerings of the Jewish people at the time of Christ. However, in the *yajna*, it is not only the priest but also the members of the community, whether it is only the elders of the community, or the individuals who make a special offering for a specific intention, or the entire community, who take part in the *yajna*. From a Christian perspective, the fire is taken to be Christ who purifies sins, which are offered and poured into the fire with the intention of a change of heart. Also, during a *yajna*, all of creation is invoked to praise the Creator, and this is mirrored by an additional part to the opening prayer in the Southern Gujarati liturgy that uses the Cantic of Daniel (Dn. 3:52-90) and Psalm 148 to invoke all of creation to praise God for this gift of the Eucharist and Jesus, whose redeeming act on the cross “cleansed the world”.

During the penitential rite, another local custom that is reminiscent of the practice of the early Christian church with regards to reconciliation is enacted. Among these tribal people, when there is matter for reconciliation, it is reported to the elders of the village community, and the entire community goes with the accused and the accuser to the river bank where a large leaf is shaped into a little bowl, one each for both parties involved. The elder pours a few drops of toddy in each, which is exchanged by the one asking for forgiveness and the one offended, and both drink from it, thus making peace with each other and the community. This is used in the liturgy, when the main celebrant invites all those seeking forgiveness from the community and from God to come forward. The celebrant then pours some water in the little steel bowls or cups

that are brought forward, and asks those who have come forward to state their purpose, at which point they “confess” their transgression and declare that they are in need of reconciliation. The celebrant then invites them to drink from each others’ cups and pronounces the prayer at the end of the penitential rite (*May Almighty God have mercy on us, and forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.*) The drinking from each others’ cup is a sign of acceptance and forgiveness.

Another ritual that is adopted from Hindu worship is the *aarathi* or *aaradhana*, which, according to the Monier-Williams dictionary is “homage, worship, adoration”¹⁸. It involves the circular waving of a platter of fire (or lamps) or flowers, or incense or a combination of all in front of the deity or altar, in an act of adoration. This is done during the Doxology and Great Amen in the Eucharistic liturgy, as a way of adoring the Eucharistic elements which have now become transformed and represents the presence of God on earth, and as a way of offering ourselves in response to God’s gift of himself:

The very nature of a gift is to evoke a response in the recipient. Accordingly, the gesture that accompanies the final doxology in the liturgy of the eucharist enables us to “see” the response of the human creature, together with Christ, offering back to God “all glory and honor”.¹⁹

After any Hindu worship, the food that is offered during the worship is distributed to all present. As this food is now considered blessed and holy, which nourishes the spiritual part of us so that we can grow in faith, everyone is invited to partake of it. Contrary to this, the Eucharistic

¹⁸ *Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary*, <http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/index.php?sfx=pdf> (accessed December 2009), 150.

¹⁹ Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child 6 to 12 years old: A Description of an Experience*, 61.

elements of bread and wine, once consecrated, can only be shared with members of the Catholic Church. Given this constraint, the churches of Southern Gujarat adopted the practice of inviting the people to bring an offering which could be brought up to the altar along with the gifts of Bread and Wine. Often this is something sweet or a coconut which is blessed and distributed at the end of Mass to all present. This practice ensures that no one in the community is excluded or alienated in any way, and paves the way for greater harmony, and in time, a deeper faith in the Church and its teachings.

And finally, after Mass, the entire community gathers outside the church and dances together in a gesture of fellowship, brotherhood and community after which they all eat together before returning to their homes.

All of these adaptations in the Eucharistic liturgy have served not only to bring the worshipping community together in greater participation, both on a personal level and as a group, during the liturgy; it has also been instrumental in helping these people experience the Real Presence in a real way. They have succeeded in building a community that lives the Gospel each day, and especially in its worship.

The question now is: can other local communities achieve this level of integrative inculturation where the signs and gestures of the liturgy serve to enhance the meaningful participation of the laity? Given the complexity of the culture of India and the conservative and cautious approach of the Roman authorities towards the approval of such ritualistic inculturation, it might be a long time before such significant results are achieved across the entire county. However, with the awareness that “(w)e face the triumph of the postmodern culture of consumerism...(which) has subverted nearly all local cultures with its profound individualism

and secularism,”²⁰ we are called to proclaim the Gospel in an action towards a greater sense of interconnectedness, and the necessity of our living in community.

The Jesuits who converted the tribes of Southern Gujarat actively catechize even now by visiting the villages each week and with a local “catechist” who is trained by them, they provide primarily doctrinal instruction. They wait patiently for the initiated to ask for baptism, never insisting on it as a means of salvation, or even offering it. They rely on the Holy Spirit and the power of the liturgy to accomplish their work of grace in the hearts of these ‘catechumens’ by giving meaning to Scriptures and then, the symbols of the liturgy – coming full circle. The liturgy can be a powerful teaching tool, if used appropriately: “The liturgy wishes to teach. . . . it simply creates an entire spiritual world in which the soul can live according to the requirements of its nature.”²¹ However, this also requires a certain openness and acceptance of liturgy as a teacher, and

People who really live by the liturgy will come to learn that the bodily movements, the actions and the material objects which it employs are all of the highest significance. It offers great opportunities of expression, of knowledge and of spiritual experience; it is emancipating in its action, and capable of presenting a truth far more strongly and convincingly than can the mere word of mouth.²²

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, in an attempt to facilitate the relationship between God and the child, he/she is taught about the liturgical symbols and gestures, while simultaneously proclaiming Scriptures, with an emphasis on the parables of the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:3-16) and the Mustard Seed (Mt. 13:31-32), narratives of the Last Supper and Resurrection, and then to

²⁰ Timothy Radcliffe, "The Sacramentality of the Word" In *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, (edited by Keith F. Pecklers. London: Continuum, 2003), 137.

²¹ Kuehn, *The Essential Guardini: An Anthology of the Writings of Romano Guardini*, 148

help the child see the connection between the liturgy with all its signs and gestures and these Scripture passages. The education in recognition of signs is given with the most essential gestures and signs of the liturgy, since children clearly respond with deep engagement only to those elements of Christianity that are most essential. Cavalletti tells of her observation of this phenomenon in her half century of leading children in religious formation: "...the themes to which children respond...though the children come from very different environments and cultures – constitute the very nucleus of the Christian message."²³

These fundamental themes that constitute the 'curriculum' of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, makes it possible to adapt it to any cultural situation, as Cavalletti affirms. It has been successfully taken to different countries and cultures [South America (Mexico, Argentina), Africa (Kenya, Uganda)] with certain adaptations. It has also been successfully revised to meet the doctrinal needs of other churches such as the Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran and United Church of Christ.

The reason that this approach to catechesis has been so successful is primarily because of the emphasis on 'relationship'. And when we look at the conversion of Saul to Paul, and his missions, that is the theme we find to be foremost – and that is how early Christianity spread. The message of Paul and the other apostles was love, creating a relationship between God and humankind, and the depth of their experience of this relationship might be described by these words written by Teilhard de Chardin:

Every affection, every desire, every possession, every light, every depth, every harmony,

²² Kuehn, *The Essential Guardini: An Anthology of the Writings of Romano Guardini*, 157

²³ Cavalletti, *Living Liturgy*, 3.

and every ardor glitters with equal brilliance, at one and the same time, in the inexpressible *relationship* that is being set up between me and you: Jesus!²⁴

For these early Christians, their relationship with God defined and informed their liturgical symbolisms. The sacramental experience of a person was based firstly on relationship. This relationship then called for the discipline of contemplation and patience and a certain rigor in worship, which then predisposed them towards the experience of a sacramental reality. Any spiritual experience is realized when one is open to it, through reflection and a characteristic awe and wonder in the presence of God. Many a catechist using the approach of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd has witnessed the enormous capacity of the child to wonder, to love, to pray and to be in relationship:

Wonder is an essential dynamic of the human spirit and of our religious life as well. It is the basis of all understanding....wonder brings us the awareness that we can never fully fathom the reality we are living.²⁵

Even though this capacity towards awe and wonder in adults is not comparable to that of the child, it is nevertheless present and available to those initiated into the way of being in relationship with God. This approach to the religious formation of the child could be used with some modifications, with the adult, in order to enhance a person's spiritual awareness, and therefore, spiritual experience.

Even though an experience of the spiritual is necessary at some time in the spiritual journey in order to give us hope and help us grow in faith, this is not always tangible in the

²⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Ursula King. *Piere Teilhard de Chardin: Writings*, (Modern Spiritual Masters Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 109.

²⁵ Sofia Cavalletti, Patricia Coulter, Gianna Gobbi and Silvana Montanaro, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*, (Oak Park, IL: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 1994), 39.

liturgy. In this postmodern age, when solitude and contemplation and prayer are luxuries beyond the practical means of many, a “quick spiritual high”, as it were, is the commodity in great demand. This, combined with other sociological and cultural factors, has resulted in the exodus of many Catholics into the Pentecostal denominations where the experiential is emphasized, and ironically, a greater ‘de-culturation’ of Christian worship. This regresses into a very European understanding of Christianity, disconnecting it from its Judaic roots as well as refusing to establish new links with the cultures it is present in.

The approach of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can also be used as an effective instrument towards ecumenical dialogue, given its emphasis on the very essential doctrines of Christianity and an orientation towards the awareness of “the other”. Cavalletti observes that

The subjects of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue and solidarity with all of creation are integral to what Maria Montessori names “cosmic education” or “expansive education” . . . [T]his education seeks to discover the unlimited interconnections that exist, not only between human beings, but throughout the entire universe. Cosmic education aims at orienting one to reality and helping the person discover and “occupy” his or her rightful place in reality.²⁶

In view of the fact that much of ecumenical dialogue, especially the part that addresses the liturgy, tends to presuppose a result that unifies by merging, it is important to realize that

Christ does not act as a dead or passive point of convergence, but as a center of radiation for the energies that lead the universe back to God through humanity, the layers of divine action finally come to us impregnated with divine organic energies.²⁷

As we work towards a greater unity among Christians, we must remember to see our differences through Christ, who is present to us in a most particular way in the liturgy and the sacraments.

²⁶ Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child 6 to 12 years old: A Description of an Experience*, 123.

²⁷ Teilhard de Chardin and Blanche Marie Gallagher, *Meditations with Teilhard de Chardin*, 110.

As part of our work in maintaining unity in the Church, we work towards helping indigenous cultures experience the liturgy in its fullness, and this can be accomplished when these communities are educated in the meanings of the symbols, signs and gestures of the liturgy and the sacraments. Towards this end, the approach of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd can be used, with the child as our teacher, to guide us to the essential aspects of the liturgy and how it can be revised and inculturated with integrative elements, allowing each one of the faithful to be an active participant, experiencing God in all his splendor and majesty in His Creation. As an active community, we are also ‘catechists’ in our own way, and

Particular to our work as catechists is the attention we give to the child, in the awareness that the child can teach us new pathways to God. Let us also live these days in the hope that perhaps the child has a new word for us regarding²⁸ . . . unity and harmony in the Church.

²⁸ Sofia Cavalletti in *Journals of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: 1998-2002*, (Chicago, IL: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2003), 135.

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