

Pearls in the Deep: Inculturation and *Ecclesia in Oceania*

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Abstract: *Ecclesia in Oceania* mentions Blessed Mary Mackillop in that “her holiness was as Australian as she was Australian” (no.6). This article explores the challenges confronting Christians throughout Oceania in this respect, whether they be Samoan, Melanesian or New Zealanders. Community, inculturation and a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in ways appropriate for the peoples of Oceania are the key themes and insights emerging from the Synod. It is argued that that these themes cannot be taken in isolation and that inculturation and/or contextualisation must be an essential element in planning for the future.

Key Words: Synod – Oceania; inculturation; contextualisation; *Ecclesia in Oceania* – reception; *Novo Millenio Ineunte*; linguistic-cultural diversity; evangelisation

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 1998, after lengthy consultation with the people of the region, the Catholic bishops of Oceania, from Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, travelled to Rome to attend the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Oceania. The focus of the Synod was the person of Jesus Christ and how to walk his way, tell his truth and live his life. There had been Synods previous to this: for the bishops of Africa, Asia and America; and Synod for Europe was in the final stages of preparation, however, this Synod was special in a number of aspects. It was the shortest in duration, and the smallest of the Synods in terms of numbers: with 117 members, plus the Pope, 19 auditors and 14 additional personnel. This was the only Synod in which all the bishops of the region had been invited, in fact, all except three of the bishops from the region participated. Most of the bishops already knew one another, having met at the FCBCO (Federation of Catholic Bishops Conferences of Oceania) Assembly in Auckland in 1994. There were others included as fraternal delegates, such as Lutheran bishop Wesley Kigasung of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea.

The impressive opening mass in St Peters Basilica included dancing and music from the Pacific, notably Samoa. It seems that some Roman officials were not exactly enthused at the sight of tattooed Samoan men in traditional dress dancing in the Basilica. Perhaps it is symbolic of a cultural gulf when sights that are quite “normal” in the Pacific appear so scandalous to some members of the Roman Curia?

Talks presented by the bishops during the first week were pastorally oriented and remarkably frank. For example, in his presentation referring to the shortage of priests, Bishop Kiapseni of Kavieng, PNG, said that it seems the community’s right to celebrate the Eucharist has become a privilege and a rare one at that. Celebrations of the Word with Holy Communion distributed by a catechist or non-ordained brother or sister is no

substitute for the celebration of the Eucharist.¹ These are bold words in a Roman aula. Unfortunately, so often, courageous solutions to such problems are easily dismissed by people outside of the region. Realising this, at the end of the Synod, Cardinal Williams, from New Zealand, as spokesman for the whole of Oceania said, "May I make one plea, Holy Father? It is that not only the propositions but also the interventions of the Synod's first week be a constant source of reference when the Apostolic Letter is being prepared. We tried our hardest and gave of our best in addressing themes close to our hearts and to the hearts of our priests and people."²

The Synod ended on the 12 December 1998, and then the church in Oceania waited for the Pope's response to the propositions given to him by the bishops. The initial proposal was for the Pope to come himself to New Caledonia to present his Post-Synodal Exhortation. However, when it became obvious that his health was not up to the long journey, it was decided to promulgate the Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania* in Rome, and to send it by internet to the local churches of Oceania. So, on the 22 November 2001, three years to the day from when the Synod began, the church in Oceania received the official papal document.

In his speech at the presentation of *Ecclesia in Oceania*, Cardinal Williams noted that, "Communion, inculturation and a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in ways appropriate for the peoples of Oceania" were the key themes and insights which emerged from the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Oceania.³ In this paper I intend to read the document *Ecclesia in Oceania* from the perspective of one of those themes: that of inculturation. How is the theme presented in the document? What are some of the implications for the Church in Oceania?

2. INITIAL REACTIONS TO THE DOCUMENT

Initial media attention focused on two explicit apologies in the document. The first apology, in section no.28 on "Indigenous People", referred to the so-called "stolen generation" in Australia. Earlier in the twentieth century aboriginal children had been separated from their families and placed in boarding institutions, many of them run by the Church. Secondly, in section no.49, on "The life of the ordained", the Pope apologised for the involvement of clergy and some members of religious orders in sexual abuse. Australian opposition leader Simon Crean applauded the pope for his apology to aboriginals. Murray Ryan Jupita, one of the stolen generation, interviewed afterwards on the ABC Darwin, said that it was a justified apology to the indigenous people of Australia. He said that religious institutions had been involved in the abuse of the stolen generation. He was surprised and glad about the statement.⁴

After the initial comments there was silence. One person, writing from Australia, said there was some initial excitement, especially with the apologies, and then "it was as if *Ecclesia in Oceania*, the document, dropped into the Pacific Ocean and disappeared without trace." Another commented, "Rather than having dropped off the theological radar screen, it never came onto it." Jim Neilan, writing from New Zealand in *Tui Motu*, calls

¹ Bishop A. Kiapseni, Synod Intervention, 1998, reprinted as "Tradition and Inculturation" in *General Bulletin msc*, 6 (December), 10.

² Personal communication, Cardinal Williams.

³ Cardinal T. Williams, "Presentation of Cardinal Thomas Stafford Williams at the Promulgation of the Post-Synodal Exhortation," Vatican City, 22 November 2001, 10.

⁴ ABC Darwin, Interview by Fred McCue, 9.07AM AEST, Friday, 23 November 2001.

Ecclesia in Oceania “a very disappointing document.”⁵ Chris McGillion, the Herald’s religious affairs columnist in Australia said that Pope John Paul’s response to the Synod was “a tiny drop in Oceania.”⁶

My response to these criticisms is: do we just leave the document submerged in the Ocean or do we venture out to see if there are some pearls there to be harvested from beneath the surface?

3. THE THIRD “APOLOGY”

If one looks closely, there is a third “apology” in the document – perhaps “confession” would be a better term. In section no.7 on “Mission and Culture”, we read: “The missionaries brought the truth of the Gospel which is foreign to no one; but at times some sought to impose elements which were culturally alien to the people. There is a need now for careful discernment to see what is of the Gospel and what is not, what is essential and what is less so.” Surely, such a statement in a papal document addressed to people in Oceania, should be taken seriously.

What were these burdens laid (imposed) upon people by Catholic missionaries? Is the Pope referring to monogamy, “foreign” languages like English and French, school systems, dress codes, or bans on traditional rituals? It would most probably be difficult to come to a consensus on what was “imposed”, however, the statement amounts to a confession that missionaries have, in one form or other, inflicted their own cultural values on indigenous people. Maybe these were “good” values, but presented in a way that demanded an external adherence without sufficient respect for the free will of the other.

The first missionaries were men and women of their time. In the late 19th century and early 20th century evolutionary thinking dominated in the sciences and in European cultural attitudes. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, Catholic theology was dominated by the medieval missionary paradigm, summed up in the well-known axiom, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Outside the church there is no salvation.) In the 1960’s, with the Second Vatican Council one finds a new openness to culture, and Council documents with statements referring to the rules of Christian ethics being already present in the customs of non-Christian nations, thanks to the action of God’s Word and the Spirit, which “enlighten all people” (cf. *Nostra Aetate* no.2).

Early missionaries were doing their best with the theological and missiological tools available to them at the time. Many worked hard to learn the language and culture of the people among whom they lived. Yet, we have to admit cultural imposition has occurred, intentionally or unintentionally, and as the document has noted, it is not too late for evaluation and discernment in the area of the Gospel and culture. If the Pope’s apology is to be more than empty lip-service, missionaries, along with the local churches, need to look anew at the interaction of Gospel and cultural values today. This is fundamental to the process of inculturation.

⁵ J. Neilan, “The Synod Document,” *Tui Motu InterIslands*, February 2002, 7.

⁶ Chris McGillion in the *Herald*, 27 November 2001. McGillion continued: “Like a general who ignores the reports of his field commanders that ammunition is low, the maps all wrong, and the shoe leather wearing thin, Pope John Paul II is urging his army on to new conquests. It is a short-sighted strategy that ultimately could prove self-defeating.”

4. INCULTURATION

“Inculturation” is a new term expressing an old reality in the history of the Christian Church: i.e. the insertion of Christianity into different cultures and the establishment of new kinds of Christian communities.⁷ Historians point to examples of inculturation in the early Jewish context, such as decisions about circumcision of Christians and the reinterpretation of Jewish dietary laws. The church borrowed elements from Roman civilisation such as the hierarchically structured imperial system, the legal system, and the territorial division in provinces and dioceses. Through creative assimilation the church gave new meaning to the Jewish Passover, and Christmas celebrations replaced the Roman winter festival. Later, theological concepts were reformulated in Aristotle’s philosophical categories.

However, the actual term “inculturation” has been used only in the last twenty years. The 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops defined inculturation as signifying “an interior transformation of authentic values through their integration into Christianity, and the rooting of Christianity in various human cultures.” The theological basis here is that of “incarnation” where the eternal *Logos* was immersed in the human condition in Jesus of Nazareth, taking full part in the Jewish culture, and then critically challenging the culture from within, calling its people to conversion and change. What is more, Jesus reached out to marginalized people like prostitutes, lepers and the possessed, non-Jews and women. This model of the incarnation has been taken as a model for the inculturation of the church in different contexts.

5. INCULTURATION IN THE POST-SYNODAL EXHORTATION

Section no.16 of the Post-Synodal Exhortation, under the sub-heading “The Gospel and Culture” explicitly addresses the issue of “inculturation.” (In contrast, the topic merited a whole chapter in *Ecclesia in Africa*.) The position in the document does little to indicate the importance given to it by the bishops at the Synod. In fact, at the Synod, after the topic of the “Unique contribution of Oceania,” “Inculturation” was the subject of the second of the fifty propositions approved and given to the Pope. The proposition noted both modern “Western” values such as promotion of the dignity of the person, and the ecological movement; and values from indigenous cultures such as a sense of the sacred, of joy, of community, of sharing, and of communal ownership.

The Exhortation defines inculturation as “the gradual way in which the Gospel is incarnated in the various cultures.” In some cases Christian values readily take root in a particular culture. At other times the process of inculturation involves the transformation and purification of cultural values. There is an echo here of Paul VI’s definition of evangelisation as “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no.18).

In Section no.16, the Exhortation uses expressions like “Inculturation is born out of respect for both the Gospel and the culture in which it is proclaimed,” “The word made flesh is foreign to no culture,” “In each culture the Christian faith will be lived in a unique way,” and, “the Church... must respect each culture and never ask the people to renounce

⁷ See F. Zocca, “Towards a Positive Theology of Cultures,” *Catalyst* 31.2 (2001): 232-244; F. Zocca, “Reflections on Inculturation of the Catholic Church: Official Guidelines and Possible Models.” (paper, 2002, to be published in *Catalyst*).

it.” Such ideals are laudable and possibly thought provoking. Implementation in practice, in today’s changing world is another issue, hardly addressed. As Solomon Islander Henry Paroi notes, people may feel resentment today when an outsider comes talking about inculturation, “because at one time they were told that their practices were bad and evil, and now they are asked to do the very things that were rejected in the first place.”⁸

References relevant to inculturation are not limited just to section no.16, but occur throughout the document. For example, in the Introduction (no.1) we read how “from the earliest times, the peoples of Oceania were moved by the divine presence in the riches of nature and cultures.” This statement is based not so much on a theology of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, but rather a protological (creation) theology, or a pneumatological model as the activity of God’s Spirit. This approach is often allied to a “Fulfillment theology” because the Gospel is seen as fulfilling the deepest longings of the human heart, and pre-Christian attempts to fulfil these longings are regarded as genuine religious practices, inspired by the Spirit, but lacking the revelation of God’s special relationship with us in Christ.

We also read how “it is the Church’s task to help indigenous cultures preserve their identity and maintain their traditions (no.28) and about the importance in the liturgy of the appropriate use of symbols drawn from the local cultures so as to avert the cultural alienation of indigenous people (no.39). The Pope says that the Church in Oceania needs to study more thoroughly the traditional religions of the indigenous populations, in order to enter more effectively into the dialogue which Christian proclamation requires.” To accomplish this the church needs experts in many fields above all, theology (no.25). This is hardly new (cf. *Ad Gentes*, no.22).⁹

The papal document acknowledges the so-called “double aspect” of inculturation whereby the Gospel challenges cultures and requires that some values and forms are transformed or purified, while at the same time culture offers positive values and forms that enrich and modify our understanding of the Gospel. This requires a “dialogue” which involves both Gospel and cultural values. The document puts it in terms of “identifying what is and what is not of Christ.” In this way, not only will “cultures attain the fullness of life to which their deepest values have always looked and for which their people had always hoped” but also “the positive values and forms found in the cultures of Oceania will enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived” (no.16). The Pope notes how the Synod Fathers, “recognised that the many cultures each in different ways provide insights which help the Church to understand better and express the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (no.17).

This acknowledgement that inculturation is a two-way street in which Christian faith is not only integrated into other cultures, but those other cultures have their own unique contribution to the church itself, needs to be taken seriously. There is a catch though, because, as we read in section (no.17), “Genuine inculturation of the Christian faith must always be done with the guidance of the universal Church”, and “new expressions and forms should be tested and approved by the competent authorities.” As

⁸ H. Paroi, “How do we identify Melanesian Christians?,” *Catalyst* 30.2 (2000): 167.

⁹ “To achieve this, it is necessary that in each of the great socio-cultural regions, as they are called, theological investigation should be encouraged... In this way it will be more clearly understood by what means the faith can be explained in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the people, and how their customs, concept of life and social structures can be reconciled with the standard proposed by divine revelation... Christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture, and local traditions together with the special qualities of each national family, illumined by the light of the Gospel, will be taken up into a Catholic unity.” *Ad Gentes*, no.22.

we have seen recently in the struggle with Roman officials to have liturgical texts with appropriate English language approved for the region, the “guidance” and “approval” of authorities in Rome can prove to be quite inhibiting in practice.

6. THE UNIQUE QUALITY OF OCEANIA

The Papal document notes that Oceania comprises a unique part of humanity in a unique region (no.6). The Pacific Ocean covers 181 million Sq. km., which is about one third of the earth’s surface. The population is relatively low.¹⁰ In the year 2000, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific had a total of population of 34,082,000, which was only 1.8% of the world population of 6,142,000,000 people. Yet there is a unique diversity in the region. For example, there are (or were) almost 1400 distinct languages (not dialects) spoken in the Pacific, or about a quarter of the world’s languages.¹¹ If each language represents a distinct culture, then one can imagine the cultural richness of Oceania.

Melanesia (excluding W. Papua)		946+
Papua New Guinea	750+	
Solomon Islands	63	
Vanuatu	105	
New Caledonia	28	
Micronesia		16
Belau	1	
Northern Marianas and Guam	1	
Marshall	1	
Kiribati	1	
Nauru	1	
Federated States of Micronesia	11	
Fiji and Polynesia		22
Fiji, including Rotuma	3	
Tonga	2	
Niue	1	
The Samoas	1	
Tuvalu	1	
Tokelau	1	
Wallis and Futuna	2	
Cook Islands	3	
Hawai’i	1	
French Polynesia	5	
Easter Island	1	
Aotearoa New Zealand	1	
Australia (some extinct or moribund)		200
Total		1184+

Table 1: Pacific Languages by Region and Country¹²

¹⁰ E. Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands* (Suva: Suva School of Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, 1993).

¹¹ J. Lynch, *Pacific Languages* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 25.

¹² Source: J. Lynch, *Pacific Languages*, 28.

These are conservative figures. Others would put the numbers higher, particularly for Melanesia. Speakers of many of these languages now live outside their home countries, and particularly in Australia and New Zealand, immigration from other parts of the world have resulted in a much greater linguistic and cultural complexity in recent years.

A question for the church is how to appreciate this cultural diversity in a way that can enrich the faith life of our nations.

7. CONTEXTUALISATION

A term that does not appear in the exhortation, but which is surely relevant is "contextualisation." Too often "inculturation" is seen in terms of traditional cultural values only, or is based on models of culture that do not take social change sufficiently into account. Contextualisation puts more emphasis on inculturation in the rapidly changing context in which we find ourselves today.¹³ In most parts of Oceania, the culture that was the object of the first evangelisation no longer exists as such. People live today in a completely different world. Contextualisation tries to address the question of how to proclaim the Gospel in a way that resonates with the local experience of people's life and culture in a time of rapid change. The *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) for the Synod noted that the crisis of evangelisation today is more than just a crisis of faith but also a crisis of culture (IL no.21).

The Post-Synodal Exhortation acknowledges the need for new approaches to meet new situations. We read about changes today, both positive and negative (no.7) For example, today, a tidal wave of secularism, sweeping across the Pacific, is testing the vitality of church life. Worse than antagonism comes indifference. In Australia, weekly mass attendance has fallen from 50% in 1960 to 20% at the end of the century. In New Zealand the number of those who declare themselves as having "no religion" has increased from 27.2% of the population in 1991 to 37% in 1998.¹⁴ Clearly, many people are facing a crisis of faith in institutional religion.

What sort of vision can the Church propose in such a situation? At the Synod, Archbishop Hickey of Perth, in his report asked, "Have we a vision of an evangelised culture or society? What then are the signs of an evangelised culture?" Archbishop Hickey himself replied in terms of Mt. 11:4-5: the vision Jesus gave in response to the questions of John the Baptist's emissaries: "Go back to John and report what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead people are raised to life, and the poor have the Good News preached to them." The Archbishop added, "Our region will only be successfully evangelised when we are able to repeat these words of Jesus."¹⁵

We read in the Exhortation how the Church must respond in new and effective ways to moral and social questions (no.7), how Christ must be represented in a way well adapted to the younger generation and the rapidly changing culture in which they live (no.14), that the Church must incorporate the positive aspects of youth culture into the church's life and mission (no.44), and that Jesus Christ wants to meet the people of

¹³ For a recent view from the Pacific, see the paper by Sr. Keiti Ann Kanongata'a, "Why Contextual," (paper, Conference on Contextual Theology, Suva, August 2001). To be published in the *Pacific Journal of Theology*.

¹⁴ Source of statistics: Intervention of Archbishop George Pell at the Synod, and the Address by Cardinal Tomko to the New Zealand Bishops, reported in the *NZ Catholic*, 29 November 1988, 8.

¹⁵ Synodus Episcoporum, *Bulletin* 4, 23 November 1998, 18.

Oceania in “new ways” (no.4). The sentiments expressed are excellent, but the challenge to find new ways to put such sentiments into practice in the life of the church is a daunting one. We can look at census statistics and, for example, bemoan the fact that relatively speaking Catholics are now 3% less in the total population of Papua New Guinea than 10 years previously. But surely that should not cloud our vision for still we have 1,391,000 people who declare that they are Catholic and what a resource that is!

There is no shortage of difficulties. As Cardinal Williams pointed out in his address at the promulgation of the Post-Synodal Exhortation, problems confronted by the local Churches in Oceania have intensified in the three years since the Synod. Social, political and economic stability have been threatened by a political coup in Fiji, the after-effects of ten years’ of conflict on Bougainville, armed insurrection in the Solomon Islands, displaced West Papuans crossing into the Papua New Guinea border provinces, Asian boat-people desperately seeking sanctuary, economic recession causing a quarter of Cook Islanders to migrate from their home islands, and Oceania’s nearest neighbours, the East Timorese suffering terrible bloodshed and devastation in revenge for their referendum vote in favour of independence. These socio-economic and political factors must be taken into account.

The problems and challenges notwithstanding, the Church in Oceania offers a unique contribution to the Universal Church. Among these are the following:

- Richness of cultures, languages and ways of expressing faith.
- Laity involved and taking responsibility in church life.
- Closeness to the environment.
- Freshness. The region is the most recent to receive the Gospel
- Multicultural societies
- Tradition of small communities
- Australian and New Zealand societies exhibit the value of tolerance.
- Societies in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific value relationships and hospitality.
- We have indigenous spiritualities as unique expressions of the sacred.¹⁶

These are values and resources that we can build on in contextualising the Gospel in Oceania today. As the Exhortation puts it, “The Church is challenged to interpret the Good News for the peoples of Oceania according to their present needs and circumstances” (no.14).

8. A COMPANION TO *NOVO MILLENIO INEUNTE*

Ecclesia in Oceania explicitly mentions *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI – “The Beginning of the New Millennium”), as a source of insight for implementing the experience of the Synod (no.9). NMI also explicitly states that the rich legacy of reflection in the Synods must not be allowed to disappear, but must be implemented in practical ways (NMI no.29).

In many respects, NMI comes across as more practical than *Ecclesia in Oceania*. It calls on each local church to reflect on what the Spirit has been saying to the people of God during the Jubilee year (NMI no.3) and the calls for the Church to set up a post-Jubilee pastoral plan (NMI no.15) At one stage it uses the appealing image of the new millennium as “opening before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture” (NMI no.58).

The renewal envisaged in NMI focuses on “holiness”, which is about the “life” of the Christian community. Bishop John Dew of Wellington spoke about this at the Synod. He

¹⁶ See P. Gibbs, “The Transformation of Culture as New Evangelisation (for the Third Millenium in Oceania)” *Studia Missionalia* 48 (1999): 330.

pointed out how young people are struggling with life issues and the church is called to give hope and life to them by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Our world is not going to be changed by ideas, words, sermons or books. Our world will be changed by the witness of holy lives."¹⁷ How can we be holy in the most ordinary circumstances of life? The point is to help people answer this call to holiness in ways "adapted to people's needs" (NMI no.31). It involves discovering Christ as the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart, lived in the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups (NMI no.40). The document notes that "This should be done however with the respect due to the different paths of different people and with sensitivity to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian message must be planted in such a way that the particular values of each people will not be rejected but purified and brought to their fullness" (NMI no.40).

NMI continues explicitly on the theme of inculturation: "In the Third Millennium Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this need for inculturation. Christianity, while remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root. In this Jubilee year, we have rejoiced in a special way in the beauty of the Church's varied face. This is perhaps only a beginning, a barely sketched image of the future which the Spirit of God is preparing for us" NMI no.40).

9. WHERE ARE THE PEARLS?

What is new in the Post-Synodal document, *Ecclesia in Oceania*? Someone commented that the document reads like the minutes of a meeting at which the pope was an observer. Maybe this is true, but if we dive deep, I think there are pearls to be harvested.

For a short time the Synod and the Post-Synodal document put Oceania on the ecclesial map, not just in controversy over bare torsos in St Peter's but in the sheer vastness and variance of the region. The document obviously struggles with the immensity of the region and the diversity, with islands, deserts, cities and villages. Even in one nation like Papua New Guinea, we labour with diversity. For example, the *Tok Pisin* version of *Ecclesia in Oceania* translated in Rabaul used expressions and spelling that are hardly acceptable on the mainland of PNG. Will we need to have regional pidgin translations of the document even within Papua New Guinea?

What else is new? The fulfilment model of incarnational theology is hardly new. Nor are there novel answers to questions bishops were raising about divorced and remarried, or the shortage of priests to celebrate Eucharist. At times it appears that Rome either did not understand or chose to side-step such issues. For example in no.40 there is a statement no doubt coming from our bishops at the Synod that there is a need for "great wisdom and courage" in addressing the situation of not enough priests. Most of the Bishops were calling for solutions, like *virī probati* (ordaining mature married men) or other creative proposals. The Pope has added, "I make my own the Synod's insistence that greater efforts be made to awaken vocations to the priestly life, and to allocate priests throughout the region in a more equitable way." Laudable as the statement is, I doubt if that was what the bishops were wanting to hear!

¹⁷ Synodus Episcoporum, *Bulletin* 6, 24 November 1998, 5.

In fact, there are still outstanding points of tension between the Bishops and Rome, such as consultation on the appointment of bishops, lack of effective dialogue between the Roman offices and the local churches, the translation of liturgical texts, consultation when documents are changed, and the problem of access of (conservative) pressure groups to the Roman Curia.

Despite these difficulties, in my opinion, the “pearls” are to be found in the combination of the three points raised by Cardinal Williams in his address at the promulgation of the Exhortation: community, inculturation and a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in ways appropriate for the peoples of Oceania. How will inculturation contribute to the building up of *communio* and to a renewed evangelisation in Oceania?

Inculturation is not an end in itself, rather a means to a more genuine and vital local church, and a way of contributing the special gifts of the local church to the wider church. In section no.16 we read how “the Church invites all people to express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to their heart and minds.” Note the order here – heart and minds. The living word must speak to the heart of a people first. The required depth will be achieved only as part of a process of inculturation/contextualisation.

Moreover, the formation of Christian communities (*communio*) does not occur in isolation. At the Synod, Bishop Walker of Broken Bay asked, “Is the life of the Catholic community a genuine embodiment of our traditional faith which speaks meaningfully and relevantly to the society of which it is a part?”¹⁸ As the Exhortation rightly notes, the Church, in seeking to proclaim the Gospel in Oceania, faces a twofold challenge: on the one hand the traditional religions and cultures, and on the other, the modern process of secularisation (no.20). This entails a “personal encounter” (no.20), and a “new conversation” (no.16) as the Church respectfully listens, challenges, and invites people to come into the fullness of truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Such dialogue will be greatly facilitated by appropriate inculturation/contextualisation in which culture and Gospel “will meet in a mutually enriching way” (no.10).

At this point we are launching out into the deep because it is not clear where we will end up and, from the Exhortation it seems that Rome does not have the map. NMI no.29 notes that the Church already has the program for the future – the Gospel and living Tradition. That is correct. But the question is how to interpret the Gospel and to what degree the Church in Oceania is really free to benefit from a “living” tradition? Statements in NMI no.46 that “the unity of Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities,” notwithstanding, will Rome take the Bishops of Oceania seriously when they propose changes and new approaches suited to the context of the Church born under the Southern Cross?

10. GOSPEL AND LIVING TRADITION

At the Synod, Bishop Gilles Côté of Daru-Kiunga, PNG, argued for the importance of building Church upon the strengths of culture: “The only way to build the Church, Mystery of Communion, in our Melanesian Society, is to build it with the participation of all, making sure that the key values of the culture become somehow the key values of our process of evangelisation.... Our efforts and our methods used for evangelisation need to make it possible for the Catholic faith to immerse itself in our Melanesian culture and to be re-expressed according to the legitimate forms of that culture. Will the Institutional Church

¹⁸ *L'Osservatore Romano* 49 (English edition), 9 December 1998, 18.

allow Jesus to walk the way of the people of Melanesia, just like he did in Palestine, challenging the truth of their own religious experiences, purifying and enriching their lives, not from outside or from the top, but from within?"¹⁹

Bishop Côté's sentiments are reminiscent of the words of Pope Paul VI (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975):

What matters is to evangelise man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes*, always taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God (*EN* 20).

I believe that this is where Church in Oceania – whether in Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific or Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands – must start in their interpretation of the Gospel: with the person as starting point and the relationships of people among themselves and with God! That is where we will discover the treasure of the living tradition found in the faith of people in the small communities throughout Oceania. It is not a matter of magnificent new programmes to establish Ecclesial Communities from the top down, but rather to appreciate what we have and to support and nurture that (as one "cultures" pearls?).

The primary agent of inculturation must be the living community and attempts to impose change from above will most likely result in superficial forms of cultural expression which do not come from the heart. Inculturation/contextualisation will occur when the agents of inculturation get involved in people's struggles and hopes. This means beginning with the communities themselves, encouraging them in a continuing process of conversion as they look at their own experience in the light of the Gospel.²⁰

The primary agents of inculturation are the local churches, yet if a renewed proclamation of the Gospel entails bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new, then there will most likely be other agents besides church-going Christians. Christian communities surely offer an indispensable contribution in giving witness to Christ. But is Christ limited to the Church? One must be open to the possibility of the Good News being shared by other agents. Where would one find such dialogue partners? As I have argued elsewhere,²¹ they will be found where one finds witness to values such as community, compassion and care of creation.

11. IMPLICATIONS

i. If "holiness" is living your ordinary life the best possible way you can," then for inculturation/contextualisation we have to ask: How does the situation you are in help or hinder you in your attempt to live your life as best you can? What is it you need to live a better life in terms of the fullness of life Jesus has offered us? Cardinal Ratzinger's words at the Synod may be relevant here. He warned the bishops against any false sweetening of

¹⁹ Synod Intervention, summary in *L'Osservatore Romano* 48 (English edition), 2 December 1998, 15. Quotation from type-written manuscript by Bp. Côté.

²⁰ See P. Gibbs, "Transforming Humanity from Within: Inculturation as a Challenge for Evangelisation in Papua New Guinea," *Compass* 33.2 (1999): 16-20.

²¹ Gibbs, "Transformation of Culture," 327-345.

the figure of Jesus and pointed out that the Lord warned his disciples not to be sugar, but rather the “salt” of the earth.²²

ii. Theologically, we are challenged by the *kenosis*, or self-emptying of the incarnation. Taking the example from the Pope, would now be an opportune time for the Church in Oceania to apologise for the cultural impositions of the past? If so, what form should such an apology take, and what symbols would be appropriate in such a gesture?

iii. The Pope has replied to the Synod propositions and ultimately the implementation of points in the Exhortation lies in the hands of the Church in Oceania. Maybe *Ecclesia in Oceania* did drop into the Pacific Ocean without causing any tidal waves at the time. However, each church member should ask how the document challenges us in our own particular fields. Moreover, it could be a useful exercise to investigate how ideas aired in the Bishops’ presentations in the first week of the Synod, but not treated in the Papal document, could still be worth consideration at the local level.

iv. In the Exhortation no.7 we read how “there is a need now for careful discernment to see what is of the Gospel and what is not, what is essential and what is less so.” What criteria can we use for such discernment in our rapidly changing world, affected by local politics and global forces? The two criteria I find work well in discussions with people here in Papua New Guinea are: Is it life-giving? Does it promote human respect/dignity? A positive response to those two questions will surely imply Gospel values.

v. The discussion on inculturation has implications for our seminaries. We are advised that Bishops are responsible for the formation of local clergy in the context of the local culture and tradition (no.48). This implies, not so much geographical proximity to the home province, but rather formation and instruction by men and women, priests, brothers, sisters, and lay people, who themselves are examples of life-giving faith and cultural values in our contemporary world. To what degree is this the case at the present time? Moreover, how can we supply what is lacking in the present seminary system, so that our priests will be recognised in society, not as “big” men, or the equivalent of eunuchs, but as “true” men, living comfortably with their masculinity.

vi. What implications does inculturation in *Ecclesia in Oceania* have for our pastoral planning here in Oceania? I doubt if any Bishops need convincing that inculturation or pastoral planning are desirable. The difficulty is in the details of how to develop pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community. Here we must avoid having our canoe holed on two reefs: the top-down, hierarchical model of Church, and what *Ecclesia in Oceania* terms falling prey to ecclesial introversion (no.19). The proposed Assembly of the Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea is one excellent move to initiate a process of planning that entails dialogue between the church leadership and the grass-roots faith communities. The Assembly will benefit from insights of the Synod and the topics chosen for the Assembly reflect the primary concerns expressed in the Post-Synodal Papal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*.

12. CONCLUSION

Ecclesia in Oceania mentions Blessed Mary Mackillop, saying that “her holiness was as Australian as she was Australian” (no.6). A similar ideal confronts Christians throughout Oceania – that their holiness be as Samoan as they are Samoan, Melanesian as they are Melanesian...

²² In the summary of Cardinal Ratzinger’s intervention, the *L’Osservatore Romano* (daily edition), 28 November 1998, 8, refers to “un falso addolcimento della figure di Gesù.”

Starting with the statement from Cardinal Williams that community, inculturation and a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in ways appropriate for the peoples of Oceania are the key themes and insights which emerged from the Synod, I have argued that these themes cannot be taken in isolation and that inculturation and/or contextualisation must be an essential element in planning for the future. The Bishops have warned that the Church “must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion” (no.19), I maintain that genuine and appropriate inculturation will make possible new encounters with Christ, and “these new encounters will become the seeds of new mission” (no.3).

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