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Inculturation and Mission in Africa – The Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* and The Way towards an African Theology of Mission

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Context and insights of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*

World War I, called the "Great War" was an unprecedented experience of horror and death: for the first time, weapons of mass destruction were among the means of warfare, 10 Million people died on the battlefield, and the political order of Europe collapsed, together with the former three political empires Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia.

In 1914, Pope Benedict XV, a great pacifist, was at the beginning of his pontificate. Despite his calls for peace, the European powers rushed into war, convinced – on either side – to gain a quick victory. What followed were four years of slaughter and destruction. After the capitulation of Germany and the abduction of the last German Emperor Wilhelm II, the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 blamed war responsibility ("Kriegsschuld") on Germany alone. Germany had to pay huge reparations to the "Big Four": the USA, Britain, France, and Italy. It "lost" its colonies, and most of the German missionaries were expelled from their mission posts and from the overseas territories where they used to work. The famous Treaty of Versailles, which the Holy See judged to go against Christian principles and international law, "released the demons stirring hatred among nations"[1] and was probably instrumental for the post-war extremism of Nazism and communism.

[1] Andrzej Miotk SVD, "The historical significance and prophetic resonance of the Apostolic Letter *Maximum illud* on the centenary of its publication," *Verbum SVD* 60 (2019): 11-41, at 15.

In the same post-war year 1919, Pope Benedict XV issued the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*[2] as a contribution to help and re-establish the Catholic missions that had suffered "from the severe wounds and losses inflicted by the war" (MI 41). Benedict XV follows a threefold scope: 1. Mission is a concern and a duty for every member of the Church. 2. The work of evangelisation is universal in its character and not restricted to a specific language, culture, or nation. 3. A local clergy is at the heart of effective and long-lasting evangelisation.[3] All three topics keep being relevant in the long history from mission Churches in Africa to authentic and autonomous African local Churches.

Maximum Illud is the first of five great encyclical letters[4] on mission before the Second Vatican Council and can be called "the Magna Carta of modern mission work"[5], especially concerning the formation of indigenous clergy in the so-called mission churches. The war of the European nations had also hit Africa, where brethren had to fight against each other when their homeland belonged – as a colony – to different opposing European countries, like, for instance in West Africa, Togo, and Benin. Therefore, the intention of Benedict XV was primarily to overcome the nationalist trends in mission work. That is why he stresses the universal character of the task of mission, beyond political interests and nationalism. He finds clear words:

> It would be a tragedy indeed if any of our missionaries forgot the dignity of their office so completely as to busy themselves with the interests of their terrestrial homeland instead of with those of their homeland in heaven. It would be a tragedy indeed, if an apostolic man were to spend himself in attempts to increase and exalt the prestige of the native land he once left behind him. Such behaviour would infect his apostolate like a plague. … Such a situation could

[2] *Apostolic letter Maximum Illud of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XV*, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xv_apl_19191130_maximum-illud.html.

[3] Valentine U. Iheanacho, "*Maximum Illud* and its relevance in contemporary mission," *Tripod* XXXIX, no. 194 (2019): 82-93, at 90.

[4] These are *Maximum Illud* (1919) by Benedict XV, *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1936) by Pius XI, *Evangelium Praeconens* (1951) and *Fidei Donum* (1957) both by Pius XII, and *Princeps Pastorum* (1959) by John XXIII.

[5] Miotk, "Historical significance," 39.

> easily give rise to the conviction that the Christian religion is the national religion of some foreign people and that anyone converted to it is abandoning his loyalty to his own people and submitting to the pretensions and domination of a foreign power (MI 19).

A direct context where these words address concrete conflicts is China where the French protectorate was in opposition to Chinese priests and bishops to keep control and adjust to French interests. There was especially in China a great suspicion against the Christian faith, which was perceived as a foreign religion. Chinese converts for instance would escape from the Chinese jurisprudence by putting themselves under the protection of the foreign power, France. The saying was "one Christian more means one Chinese less."[6]

Pope Benedict's remedy against this reproach towards Christianity as being foreign in a given non-European culture is the formation of a local clergy that is not just assistant to the expatriate missionaries. "In this policy lies the greatest hope of the new churches. For the local priest, one with his people by birth, by nature, by his sympathies and his aspirations, is remarkably effective in appealing to their mentality and thus attracting them to the Faith" (MI 14). In terms of the formation of the indigenous clergy, Benedict XV requires excellency – "that they be well trained and well prepared" – and calls upon the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith to found seminaries in the mission regions. "For the local clergy is not to be trained merely to perform the humbler duties of the ministry, acting as the assistants of foreign priests. On the contrary, they must take up God's work as equals, so that someday they will be able to enter upon the spiritual leadership of their people" (MI 15).

Here the Pope takes up the concern of the Congregation for the propagation of faith under its Prefect Cardinal W. van Rossum who is most probably one of the authors behind this Apostolic Letter. He aimed to build up a local clergy who will also take leading positions

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[6]Georg Evers, "Rückblick auf das Apostolische Schreiben *Maximum Illud* nach 80 Jahren (1919-1999)," *Jahrbuch für kontextuelle Theologien* 7 (1999): 161-171, at 164.

in the mission churches. At the level of leaders, indigenous bishops were consecrated in the following years.[7] With this ground-breaking perspective, *Maximum Illud* prepared for the internationalisation and thus the international diversity of the Catholic World Episcopate.[8] This would eventually lead to the understanding of collegiality as pronounced by the Second Vatican Council.

The missionary formation will have to include both sacred and profane subjects while the pope stresses particularly the study of the language of the people to which the Gospel is going to be proclaimed. Remarkable is the first mention, in a Pontifical letter, of the science of missiology to be implemented in the study programme of the Pontifical College Urbanianum – "a branch of study that from now on is to be included in their (sc. the students') curriculum" (MI 23).

Another topic already mentioned here is the importance of the personal example of the missionary as a witness of Christ is called to give through his way of life. Benedict XV evokes here the "sanctity of life": "For the man who preaches God must himself be a man of God. The man who urges others to despise sin must despise it himself. Preaching by example is a far more effective procedure that vocal preaching, especially among unbelievers, who tend to be more impressed by what they see for themselves than by any arguments that can be presented to them" (MI 26). One side of this moral integrity is also to avoid "the desire to make any profit beyond the acquisitions of souls" (MI 21).

Yet, *Maximum Illud* has clearly to be read in its historical contexts. It draws a sharp demarcation line between Christians and the people "who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death". There is, and cannot be in 1917, any notion of the intrinsic value of other religions. With a feeling of racial superiority, civilisation is closely linked to Western culture and Christianity, and there is no recognition of indigenous cultures or religions as such. The indigenous people are rather "in the jaws of hell" (MI 28), "under

[7] Pope Pius XI, the successor of Benedict XV, ordained six Chinese priests to Bishops in Rome in 1926.
[8] Iheanacho, "*Maximum Illud*," 87.

the arrogant domination of Satan" (MI 36) from which they have to be rescued through missionary work and baptism.

Nevertheless, with the mentioned critique of colonial influence in the mission countries and the emphasis on the need to overcome European national interests in mission,[9] *Maximum Illud* has been described as a precursor of an era of decolonisation and a post-colonial and post-nationalist fabric of nations.[10] Andrzej Miotk SVD summarises,

> Thus, on the ruins of the Great War, *Maximum Illud* offered a Christian program of universal character that implied a new mission strategy. It responded to the felt urgency of missionaries within the mission apostolate to act in complete autonomy compared to the burden imposed by the colonial system, to ensure the spiritual function of evangelization. The document, which placed itself against the current, spelled out the supranational character of mission and the abandonment of a nationalist spirit. In this sense, it laid the foundation for a more general dynamics of religious decolonization which would be based on the two pillars of *plantatio ecclesiae* and of inculturation.[11]

The Route to Inculturation

Twenty years later, World War II brought about a considerable change in the consciousness of Africans who fought alongside with the armies of the colonial powers and discovered that the Whites were as human as they were. The Africans also experienced deep racism in the armies of both camps – the allied forces and the forces of the axis. The only army that knew already Black officers was that of the United States of America. Both experiences were fundamental for the movement of independence, which led to the end of official colonialism in the 1960ies and 1970ies.

[9]This is practically done by concentrating mission work and its directives in the Curia in Rome, especially the Congregation for the Propagation of Faith under which all four Pontifical mission societies were centralized in the ensuing reform of 1922.

[10]Michael Sievernich, "100 Jahre *Maximum illud* (1919). Das epochale Missionsschreiben von Benedikt XV," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 103 (2019): 319-326, at 324.

[11]Miotk, "Historical significance," 33.

It was shortly after World War II that the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels published his famous "Bantu philosophy"[12]. He criticised the missiological method of a *tabula-rasa*-approach that denied any previous religion to the Black Africans. He instead described the African traditional cultures and religions as being a coherent system with the vital force *(la force vitale)* as its core and leading value. On the pastoral side, he emphasised the relationship between the missionary and the neophyte as being the heart of mission – a relationship between two human persons.

The small compendium of articles "*Les prêtres noirs s'interrogent*"[13], which was published in Paris in 1956, is considered the hour of birth of African theology. It was for the first time that Black Africans openly and in a European publishing house addressed issues of actuality for the church of that time. The editors explain:

> The African priest, for the advancement of the Reign of God, must say what he thinks of his church in his country. Not that the black priest has simply never been heard. But in the tumult of voices discoursing upon the missions, his word has been rather discreet, and easily missed, whereas it would seem that he actually ought to have the first vote in chapter.[14]

In line with the thoughts of Placide Tempels, a new approach towards African traditional cultures and religions was at hand. Authors like Vincent Mulago looked closely at cultural patterns and practices within the African cultures that need not to be rejected but, on the contrary, could help to familiarise Africans with Christian beliefs and rituals. "This tendency," Francis Oborji comments, "initiated the debate in the theology of adaptation. In principle, adaptation is the missionary effort whose primary objective is to translate the Christian faith into African conceptual apparatus. However, for critics of this theology, adaptation is a missionary theory that was employed to transplant a Christianity

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[12] Placide Tempels, *La philosophie bantoue* (Paris: Présence Africaine 1949).
[13] *Les prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Paris: Présence Africaine 1956).
[14] Ibid., 16.

developed elsewhere into Africa as if Africans have no cultures of their own on which the Christian faith could anchor."[15]

The main problem, namely, the alleged superiority of a Western Christianity over against traditional African cultures, has not been done away with. It has even received further accentuation through the theology of adaptation. Nevertheless, as Ngindu Mushete concedes, "The theology of adaptation has also had an influence, which it would be wrong to deny, on the 'Africanization' of ecclesiastical personnel, catechesis, and liturgy."[16] The major event of the 20th Century for the life of the Catholic Church was of course the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). For the first time in history, the Church discovered and experienced herself – at least at the level of the bishops – to be a Universal Church with many and different cultures, different ways of understanding anthropological concepts, and of accentuating the articles of faith. Theologically, this new way of being united in diversity led to the rediscovery of the local church, and the bishop as a central figure, heading the church in a specific socio-cultural setting and standing in living union with the other bishops through the bond of collegiality. This experience of cultural diversity and the exchange beyond continental barriers was a deeply spiritual event and source of theological renewal Especially for Bishops from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania.

In terms of the theology of mission, the Second Vatican Council brings mission back to the heart of the Church. According to the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes,* the Church "is by her very nature missionary" (AG 2). Without using the term, it also opens the door for a true inculturation. Following the perspective of *Maximum Illud*, the Council Fathers stress the universal character of the Christian mission. Talking about the Church, they assert in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, "Since in virtue of her mission and nature she is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor

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[15]Francis Anekwe Oborji, "Towards an African model and new language of mission," *AFER* 43, no. 3 (2001): 109-133, at 115.

[16]Alphonse Ngindu Mushete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan 1989), 18.

to any political, economic or social system, the Church by her very universality can be a very close bond between diverse human communities and nations" (GS 42).

The Ongoing Struggle for Inculturation

Inculturation: An Ambiguous Term

The word "inculturation" first occurred in the theological debate of the 1970ies. The African bishops when united in Rome for the World Synod on Evangelisation in October 1974 issued a declaration in which they declared the "theology of adaptation" to be inadequate and opted for an African theology of incarnation.[17]

> In this notion of mission, the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar consider a certain theology of adaptation as completely superseded, and opt for a theology of incarnation instead. The young Churches of Africa and Madagascar cannot escape this fundamental requirement. Acknowledging theological pluralism in the unity of the faith, they have by all means to encourage African theological research, towards an African theology open to the fundamental desires of the peoples of the Black continent.[18]

In this launched theological debate, several authors, especially with African background, preferred the term "inculturation" to stress the intimate link between the Gospel and the culture of the addressed people.

Today, the term "inculturation" cannot be bypassed in the theological discussion, even if it has played and continues to play a different role in different contexts. Inculturation remains to be an ambiguous term that is, on the one hand, under the suspicion to represent the last attempt of the occidental Western Church to maintain her administrative and doctrinal hegemony over against other local churches. Already in the 1980ies, Aloysius Pieris' diagnostic is that of a lasting tension between Christianity as the

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[17] Cf. "Promouvoir l'évangélisation dans la coresponsabilité", *La Documentation Catholique*, no. 1664 (1974): 995-996.
[18] Ibid.

religion of the invader and the non-Christian religions that coin the identity of the Asian societies:

> Against this background, the inculturation fever could appear as a last-minute attempt to give the Church an Asian façade, a Church that is unable to take roots in the Asian soil, because nobody dares to smash the Hellenistic-Roman pot in which she has lived for over four centuries a stunted *bonsai* life.[19]

Inculturation: A twofold Process

On the other hand, inculturation is considered key for an authentic African local Church. For instance, the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port-Harcourt (Nigeria) publishes its theological journal under the programmatic title, *Journal of Inculturation Theology*. For the Indian context, Michael Amaladoss has this to say,

> I think that the average Indian still considers the Christian to be an adherent of an 'alien' religion, although we stress as strongly as possible that Christianity has been in India over almost 2000 years, since the times of the Apostle Thomas. It is not a historical problem. The problem is rather the image we project through our lifestyle, our liturgical celebrations, our organisation, our dependence from foreign funding, our relations and studies overseas. We are not yet truly inculturated.[20]

The question of inculturation tackles the encounter between cultures, which are always coined by religion, and the Gospel - which always speaks through a specific concrete culture. The dynamics of the encounter comprises a twofold movement. In whatever way we describe this field: Gospel – culture, Church – world, or faith – life, the first movement goes from Gospel to culture, as Giancarlo Collet puts it:

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[19]Aloysius Pieris, *Theologie der Befreiung in Asien. Christentum im Kontext der Armut der Religionen,* Theologie der Dritten Welt 9 (Freiburg Basel Wien: Herder Verlag, 1986), 83.

[20]Michael Amaladoss, "Befreiung: ein interreligiöses Projekt," in *Verlaß den Tempel. Antyodaya – indischer Weg zur Befreiung*, Theologie der Dritten Welt 11, ed. Felix Wilfred (Freiburg Basel Wien: Herder Verlag 1987), 146-178, at 172.

> Inculturation means this permanent process in which the Gospel within a specific socio-political and religious-cultural situation speaks in such a way that it finds its expression not only in elements of that very situation (for instance in liturgy or doctrine), but becomes its inspiring, determining and transformative power. The genuine Gospel experiences shall be expressed in a given situation in such a way that they become part and parcel of the respective culture of a people.[21]

The second movement goes from culture towards the Gospel in its cultural mediations, as known today known. When a community in a specific cultural context listens to the Word of Jesus Christ, reads the signs of the times, and lives out its genuine response to God's call today, then this community adds something creatively new to the tradition of the church, to the community of believers. This new tradition inspires the response of other Christian communities within the universal Church in their response to God's call today. Thus, inculturation is a central notion in the complex and never-finished process of tradition building.

In this perception, the non-European peoples (or local churches) with their own religious and cultural pattern, are not the addressees, but the subjects of inculturation.[22] Thus, Giancarlo Collet concludes:

> The process of inculturation shows to be a process of integration in a twofold sense, namely, as the integration of the Christian faith into the life of another culture, on the one hand, and as integration of a new (cultural) experience into the life and the reflection of the Universal Church, on the other hand.[23]

A document of the German Episcopal Conference on the missionary

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[21] Giancarlo Collet, "Inkulturation," in *Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, ed. Peter Eicher (München: Kösel Verlag, 2005), 204-216, at 205.

[22] Cf. Marco Moerschbacher, "Von der Inkulturation zum interreligiösen Dialog," *Yearbook of Contextual Theologies* 2 (1994): 191-198, at 194.

[23] Collet, Inkulturation, 215.

sending of the Church also considers inculturation to be a twofold process: "The missionary motive of inculturation means that Christianity always appears in a cultural form. It is not about the confrontation of a 'pure' Christianity without culture and a 'pure' culture without religion, but about the intercultural encounter of a give and take, of a purification and a transformation."[24] Yet, the document does not deeply develop this second movement from culture to Gospel, which is bound to question critically the Church and to enrich Christian tradition today.

Inculturation is, finally, the link between faith and life and aims at a living faith. Christianity always is inculturated. Yet, which culture are we to deal with? What, then, is the nexus of this culture to the larger society? The answer depends on the concrete context and has to include the dimension of liberation, following the message of Jesus Christ.

> Every local Church which is represented by a people is essentially an inculturated Church. The relevant question one has to ask is: *Whose* culture is mirrored by the official Church? One could as well ask: *What class of people* is it that the Church mainly identifies with? Are the poor – the main addressees of the Good News who are invited in a special way to become the disciples of Christ – a culturally determining factor? The relevance of the question of inculturation is thus to be seen in the mission of the local Church, to bring the Good News to the poor in Africa, yes to *become* the Good News for the poor in Africa.[25]

The fellowship of Jesus is following the mission of Jesus as described in Luke 4.16–21. It is about a liberating message, an option for the poor, a decision for or against the idol of Mammon.

> A church inculturated in Asia must be a church that is liberated from the idol of mammon, but must not

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[24]*Allen Völkern sein Heil. Die Mission der Weltkirche,* Die Deutschen Bischöfe Nr. 76 (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2004), Nr. 42.

[25]Pieris, *Theologie der Befreiung,* 63, "Asia" replaced by "Africa".

> necessarily be constituted only by the poor: the poor by choice, the poor through the constraints of circumstances. In other words, Inculturation is the *ecclesiological revolution* that has already begun in 'human' basic communities that gather Christians and non-Christians. These communities marry mystic to commitment and struggle – a mystic that draws from chosen poverty, and a struggle that turns against coerced poverty.[26]

In this existential approach, inculturation is to be understood as an open process. The subject of inculturation is the people of God, the community in a given context living out their faith. The content of inculturation always depends on the context and cannot be determined *a priori* to the encounter between Gospel and culture[27], but is, of course, subject to the eschatological claim of the Kingdom of God. This eschatological proclamation of Jesus Christ leads the community of the faithful towards an option for the poor, by which the poor overcome their role of mere objects and become the subjects of their liberation.

What is important to note is the processual nature of inculturation. It is a pneumatological process, which requires a constant discernment of spirits and a constant re-adjustment according to the needs of time and context. If the Spirit of God is at work in cultures and religions (including our own), then inculturation is the process of discernment of spirits and thus a matter of spirituality. It is finally not completely conceivable by rationality alone. The main challenge is intercultural dialogue, especially between Africa and Europe, in which the church is called to play her role.

This implies an ecclesiological option for unity in diversity over uniformity, as well as a challenge towards creation theology. What is implied is a positive relationship of the local churches towards cultures and a positive appreciation of the order of creation, that is, of the plurality of religions and cultures in the encounter between God and the world.

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[26]Ibid., 89f.

[27]Cf. Moerschbacher, "Von der Inkulturation," 196.

In his first post-synodal exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*[28] Pope Francis calls the task of evangelisation in that sense the "missionary heart" of the Church which makes every Christian become a "missionary disciple" (EG 120). It means to go out:

> We see then that the task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances. It constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring whenever perfection is not possible. A missionary heart is aware of these limits and makes itself "weak with the weak... everything for everyone" (*1 Cor* 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street (EG 45).

[28]http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.