

Kurisumala: An Example of Inculturation*

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ADAPTATION and inculturation are two quite different things. The second is hardly possible without the first, but the first often exists without the second and is sometimes confused with it. When a group of monks or nuns from Europe or America found a new monastery in an African or Asian country, it is normal and wise for them to make numerous adaptations, adopting the local customs concerning, for example, the form and color of habits, the nature of the food and the way it is consumed, musical instruments, and the use of local languages. These are adaptations required by common sense that we would always like to see happen, but they fall short of inculturation. This latter comprises all the aspects of the life of a group. The fact that a monastic community of European style has introduced into its liturgy the music and symbols of the culture in which it finds itself makes it a community that has had the wisdom to adapt its liturgy to the local circumstances; it does not make it an inculturated community.

Inculturation is not merely a social phenomenon; it is a spiritual and theological reality. It takes place when a culture or a cultural tradition is put in contact with the Gospel or with a way of living the Gospel (for example the monastic life). In this meeting, the two poles undergo a transformation. The culture is enriched and receives a new ultimate finality; the Gospel, or the form of Evangelical life, receives for its part a new mode of expression and being. Besides, Christian monastic life itself is the result of admirably successful inculturation, for it is the fruit of the meeting of the Gospel message with an ascetical tradition that flourished

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in the Middle East at the time of Christ and that is so widespread in all the great cultures throughout human history that it could be called a universal human archetype.

The monastic community of Kurisumala in Kerala, India, stands out for the capacity it has shown to adapt to local customs, both those coming from Hinduism and those coming from the Syro-Malankar Christian tradition, this latter being already well inserted into the culture of Kerala since the first centuries of Christianity. When you arrive at Kurisumala you meet a community closely resembling a Hindu ashram. The monks wear the *khavi*, go barefoot or wear simple sandals that they leave at the door when going into the monastery, and sit on the floor while eating, their plate on the ground. All the guests are invited to *satsangh*, a meeting of the community in the evening, and to share in the community meals. The buildings are simple and poor, etc.

However, there is more. Kurisumala is a fine example of inculturation, on numerous levels. The style of monastic life one finds there is the fruit of the meeting of the Christian monastic tradition, of Cistercian lineage, with the practices and soul of the traditional monasticism of India. The liturgical life is also the fruit of the meeting of a Benedictine-oriented experience of prayer with the great liturgical tradition of the Syriac Church as well as with the most contemplative strata of Hindu mysticism. It is about this multiple inculturation that I wish to speak in this article.

Christian Cistercian Monasticism and Hindu Monasticism

If adaptations to a new cultural context can be thought about, prepared, and decided on, such is not the case for inculturation. This latter *happens* of itself when the conditions of the encounter are fulfilled. If inculturation has been able to happen in the community of Kurisumala, it is because it happened first in the very person of Francis Mahieu, who received the name of Francis Archarya when he became an Indian citizen in 1968.¹

1. For a history of the foundation of Kurisumala and a biography of Fr. Francis Acharya, see Marthe Mahieu-De Praetere, *Kurisumala—Francis Mahieu Acharya. Un pionnier du monachisme*

When Francis Mahieu arrived in India in 1955, he was not a young man seeking new experiences. Not only was he a mature man, but he was also a Cistercian monk who had already lived twenty years of monastic life. He had been formed by a first-rate master, Dom Anselme Le Bail, and had assimilated the Cistercian identity before becoming himself master of novices, first at Scourmont, and then later, at Scourmont's foundation on Caldey. Upon arriving in India, for the first eighteen months he was in contact with two great spiritual men who had not succeeded in their dream of founding a monastic community at Shantivanam, but who had been able to integrate into their own spiritual search the deepest and most radical aspects of the spirituality of the Upashishads. This was especially the case with Le Saux, who was so fascinated by the depths of the *advaita*.

The Church of India owes its origin to Saint Thomas, who, according to tradition, evangelized India where he arrived in the year 52. The Christians evangelized by Thomas and his disciples remained in contact through the ages with the Christians of Persia, whose liturgy they adopted. When the Church of Rome came into contact with these Christians through merchants and Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, it tried to Latinize them. In 1653 the Indian Christians solemnly swore to resist these efforts and not to submit to the Portuguese Roman hierarchy. Later some entered into communion with Rome, and Leo XIII established two vicariates for them in 1887. They preserved their oriental rite, later strongly Latinized, and were called the Syro-Malabar Church. Others preserved their link with the Church of Antioch. A part of these latter accepted the authority of Rome in 1930. They preserved their Antiochene liturgy, which was never Latinized, and were called the Syro-Malankar Church.

These providential circumstances led Francis to make a cenobitic foundation in Kerala, in the heart of this Syro-Malankar Church of Syriac origin, whose richness and contemplative depth fascinated him from the very first. From this moment on, in his personal monastic life,

chrétien en Inde, Cahiers Scourmontois 3 (Scourmont, 2001). The monks of Kurisumala have also published a presentation of their community and its history on the occasion of their incorporation into the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance: *Kurisumala Ashram: A Cistercian Abbey in India* (Kurisumala, 1999).

there gradually came about a harmonious existential synthesis of the Cistercian spirituality that he had assimilated well, the Christian monasticism that he had studied carefully, and the practices of Hindu monasticism that he found in India and of which he had already seen an inculturated implementation in the lives of Monchanin and Le Saux. This synthesis was to be expressed in the very structure of the community life that he developed at Kurisumala with his Indian disciples.

Let us pause now to examine some of the more important aspects of this inculturated monastic life.

The Monastic Rite of Initiation

AT Kurisumala, as in the ashrams of India, when a postulant is admitted after several visits, he wears a white habit made up of a *dhoti* and a shirt, which hardly distinguishes him from a man of the street. After a postulancy, the length of which may vary according to circumstances, he is received as a *sadhaka*, that is, a novice, during the ceremony of *satsangh*, which corresponds to our chapter. From then on he will wear a tunic of white cotton over his *dhoti*. When he is received as a *brahmachari* in what is the equivalent of temporary profession, he receives a white shawl. Finally when he is consecrated as a *sannyasi* in what corresponds to solemn profession, he receives the saffron colored habit, the *khavi*, which not only designates him as a *sannyasi* but also obliges him to practice the type of ascesis that goes with this title in India: to go barefoot, to live a radical poverty, to follow a strictly vegetarian diet, etc.

The *Toulbasho d'Dairoye* (the clothing rite for monks) of the Syro-Malankar rite offered Fr. Francis a liturgical framework that is poetic and mystical, more adapted to the spiritual orientation of the monasticism of India than the rites of Roman origin with their more juridical conception of the sacraments. Thus he took it as a basis for the monastic rite of initiation used at Kurisumala.

The reception of *sadhakas* is a simple ceremony that takes place at *satsangh*, a meeting of the community held every evening in an ashram. The serious character of this procedure is revealed first of all in the fact that the candidate prostrates himself before the entire community in the

most reverent form, the *sahstanga namaskar* (the 'prostration of eight members'), thus named because eight parts of the body touch the ground as a sign of complete submission: the two hands, the two feet, the two knees, the chest, and the forehead. The *acharya* asks the *sadhaka* what he seeks in wanting to be admitted into the monastic *sadhana*, or way of perfection. He proclaims before all his total abandonment to the grace and mercy of the Lord as experienced in the monastic community. He is then received into the community.

The rites of the *brahmacharya diksha* (corresponding to temporary profession) and of the *sannyasa diksha* (corresponding to solemn profession) retain the structure of the Antiochene monastic clothing but have much in common with the parallel rites of Hinduism. Their Christian origins are revealed in the biblical symbolism and the choice of readings, all centered on the economy of salvation in Christ. The Hindu *diksha* is accomplished in the framework of the *viraja homa*, the sacrifice of the fire and light, symbolizing the destruction of all attachments in the ardent fire of absolute renunciation and the emergence of a new and radiant conscience. The Christian monastic consecration takes place during the Eucharistic sacrifice, before its consummation in communion, sign of immortality, and foretaste of the eternal enjoyment of the divinity. The forehead of the new Christian *brahmachari* is marked with the seal of the Lamb: he is given the tonsure in the form of a cross, his outer clothing is removed and his habit is put on, he receives a belt, his head and shoulders are covered with a shawl, and his sandals are laced. The ceremony ends with the imposition of the cross on his shoulders and the reception of the new *brahmachari* into the community.

The Celebration of the Eucharist

WE have just seen that the monastic consecration is made during the Eucharistic celebration. At Kurisumala there are two types of Eucharistic celebration: the *Qurbana* and the *Bharatiya Puja*.

The *Qurbana* is the celebration of the Eucharist according to the Antiochene rite of the Syro-Malankar Church. It is celebrated in all its splendor on Sundays and all great feasts of the Lord, the Virgin, and the

saints. It contains an exceptional richness of readings from the Word of God. There are reading from the Old Testament while the priest puts on his vestments and while the preparatory rites are taking place: four selections drawn respectively from the Law, the historical books, the wisdom books, and the prophets. During the first part of the Eucharist three passages are then read from the New Testament: the first drawn from the Acts of the Apostles, the Catholic epistles, or the Book of Revelation, the second drawn from the letters of Paul, and the third from the gospels.

This celebration lasts at least two hours. During the first fifteen years at Kurisumala it was celebrated in Syriac every day, and no one dared either to shorten or to simplify it. But it became difficult to maintain the monastic day's important balance between prayer, work, and *lectio*. After the Second Vatican Council a simpler celebration of the Eucharist in Malayalam (the language of Kerala) was drawn up for weekdays; it integrated many of the religious symbols of India. This is the *Bharatiya Puja*, also named by the guests "the Indian Mass".

Puja (from the root *puj*, 'to revere', 'worship') is linked to *bhakti*, the cult of devotion. It is the most ancient worship form in India, the daily act of worship, celebrated either privately or in the assembly. In this case it is accompanied by *bhajans*, the singing of hymns and readings from sacred books, and ends with the distribution of small bits of food. The word *puja* is commonly used in Tamil Nadu to designate the Eucharist.

In the *Bharatiya Puja*, which is celebrated seated on the ground, the first part of the Mass makes abundant use of the Indian religious symbols of fire, flowers, and incense. Indeed, because of the cosmic dimension of Hinduism, Hindu worship makes generous use of offering to God the beautiful and good things of creation. Flowers, incense, and light are the traditional signs of the offering of self and of the union of the one praying with God in love. Thus the *arati* is the circular movement of a small oil lamp placed in a nest of flowers before a sacred icon, with brief prayers called *mantras*. These *mantras* are also offered by the participants, who make a movement of their hands above the flame (or in the direction of the flame if they are far from it), thus sharing in the light, and then placing their hands on their eyes. The incense is used in two ways, either in the form of sticks called *argabathi*, or in small vases of copper with a handle that one moves in a circular fashion above the offerings.

The anaphora has conserved all the traditional elements of the oriental liturgy: prayer of introduction, recitation of the institution, anamnesis, epiclesis, intercessions, fraction, and communion, often interspersed with brief responses or hymns from those assisting.

Before the dismissal, the celebrant invites the members of the assembly to witness to Christ in their daily life. Then there is a Trinitarian formula of adoration:

Om. Adoration of the One who exists in Himself.

Om. Adoration of the God-Man.

Om. Adoration of the Holy Spirit.

All conclude: *Om. Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!* Peace! Peace! Peace!

A Monastic Office Constructed Slowly

CLEARLY, it is in the elaboration of the Divine Office that Fr. Francis and the monks of Kurisumala have manifested the most creativity.

At the time of the foundation and for the first few years they used the *S'himo*, the weekly parish breviary in Syriac, known under the name of "Breviary of Pampakuda." But if Francis Acharya and his first companion, Bede Griffiths, knew Syriac quite well, it was not so for the new Indian recruits. Beginning in 1959, Bede started to translate the *S'himo* into English, and this translation was published in 1965 under the title *The Book of Common Prayer*. It consisted of a rather literal translation in prose, difficult to use for prayer as such, which Francis reworked and brought out again several years later in his monumental work *Prayer with the Harp of the Spirit, the Prayer of Asian Churches*.²

Monastic life had disappeared from the Syriac Church of India several centuries before. Thus a monastic office was not available. Besides, in the oriental tradition, a book for the liturgy of the hours that all monasteries and all the faithful followed in full did not exist. What did exist were anthologies of very rich texts from which each monastery

2. Four volumes published at Kurisumala between 1981 and 1989. They have been republished several times since then.

chose to make up its own Office. This is what Fr. Francis undertook to do for the monastery of Kurisumala.

He began looking for the *Fenqith*, the book of prayers and hymns of a very great contemplative richness used formerly by the Syriac monks and of which the *S'himo* was only a shortened version for use in parishes. It must be said that the Portuguese authorities had led a relentless campaign to eradicate the Syriac rite at the end of the sixteenth century. At the Synod of Diamper, in 1599, all liturgical books and vestments that could be found were burned. It was at Mossul, in Iraq, that Fr. Francis finally found, after much seeking throughout all the Middle East, seven copies of the *Fenqith*, printed by the Dominicans in the preceding century. The ensemble, in seven large folio volumes, contained four thousand pages of Syriac text. Fr. Francis spent a large part of the rest of his life in meditating, choosing, translating into English, and publishing this liturgical treasure. The four volumes of the Office Book of Kurisumala, in English, total three thousand pages.

Fr. Francis was not satisfied with choosing and translating ancient Syriac texts. He composed a complete Office for all the feasts and all the seasons of the year, keeping the mystical orientation and all the theological richness of the Syriac liturgy, but introducing into each office under the rubric *Seeds of the Word* texts drawn from the sacred books of India. He could cite as an example Paul VI, who, in Bombay in 1964, used a very beautiful prayer drawn from the Upanishads:

From non-truth lead me to Truth
From obscurity lead me to Light
From death lead me to immortality.

From the appearance of the first volume, this giant work received the greatest praise from specialists in Asian liturgy, like professor Robert Taft of the Oriental Pontifical Institute in Rome and André de Halleux of Louvain.³

It is this Office that is presently celebrated at Kurisumala, in English, except for the little hours and Compline, which are sung in Malayalam.

3. Robert Taft, S.J., *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning Today* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1993) 244–46; André de Halleux, *Revue Théologique de Louvain* (1989): 495–96.

The Liturgical Year

THE liturgical year in the Syro-Malankar rite begins the Sunday closest to the last day of October. It is introduced by two Sundays of the Church: its Dedication and its Renewal. These are two preparatory Sundays during which the Church remembers what she is and meditates on her proper nature as God's dwelling place and as a privileged place of God's encounter with humanity. These two Sundays are like a prism through which the entire economy of salvation is reflected, from the call of Abraham in the book of Genesis to the vision of the new heaven and the new earth at the end of the book of Revelation.

The rest of the year is divided into seven seasons, each composed of seven weeks. They are 1) the Annunciation of the coming of the Lord, 2) the Nativity, the Epiphany, and the Baptism, 3) the Fast of the Lord, his Passion, Death, and Resurrection, 4) the fifty days of Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost, 5) the mission of the apostles in the world, 6) the Transfiguration, and 7) the Exaltation of the Cross.

Each week a complete cycle of the mysteries of salvation is celebrated, repeating in miniature the cycle of the liturgical year. Of course the Resurrection of the Lord is celebrated on Sunday. Monday, it is the Kingdom of Jesus and its announcement by John the Baptist. Tuesday, it is the Church; Wednesday, the Incarnation; Thursday, the Eucharist; Friday, the Cross; and Saturday, the Parousia.

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WE would not have a complete picture of the inculturation of the monastic life at Kurisumala without considering at least some of its other aspects, for example *lectio*, work, and hospitality.

Lectio

THE tradition of *lectio divina* in Christian monasticism is enriched by its contact with a tradition very similar to Hindu spirituality. The way of meditation in India is called *upasana*, a word that is from the same root as *upanishad*. The literal meaning is that of approaching, of sitting near someone in the attitude of a disciple with reverence and confidence, in the hope of being illuminated. In reference to meditation, the word signifies approaching the Lord with these same attitudes, recollecting oneself in the hope of attaining *paramatman*, the Supreme Being, and of being identified with him.

Upasana contains three aspects or three degrees, which are not without similarities to the traditional ladder of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. These degrees are *sravana*, listening to a master or sacred writings; *manana*, a serious search into the meaning; and *nididhyasana*, a non-conceptual deepening of the reality understood, a contemplation leading to ecstasy. A millennium after the Upanishads, the great master Sankaracharya added a fourth degree, *darshana*, or vision.

In the life of an Indian monk the way of *upasana* and that of *lectio divina* converge toward the same goal, thus giving a new and richer dimension to one another.

Work

THE monastic vocation of young Jean Mahieu (later Fr. Francis) and his attraction toward India had been awakened when he met Gandhi during his engineering studies in London. Gandhi saw the economic development of the poor masses of India not only in a simple life, but also in productive work.

Since late antiquity in India, the ashrams have been associated with the *goshalas* or cattle farms. An ancient Hindu tradition even considered the *goshala* as a place where the old cows were taken care of with love and attention until they died. Gandhi took up this idea again. However, he

wanted to combine this “service of the cow” with a healthy economy, so that the cow would not be a burden for the country but would contribute to nourishing it. For this reason he insisted upon the betterment of the cattle to augment the quantity and improve the quality of the milk. After the independence of India, Pandit Nehru had imagined a vast project aimed at developing the quality of the enormous number of cows in the country. From its first years, Kurisumala developed a model farm that was one of the first, if not the first, realization of this project of the first prime minister Nehru and that served as a model and incentive for the admirable development of a region that had been, until then, extremely poor. As time went on, hundreds of families came to live in the region of Kurisumala, supporting themselves for the most part with work at least partially linked to the farm of the ashram.

In this too we can speak of an authentic inculturation: the fruitful meeting of a monastic tradition of manual labor with the specific socio-economic situation, allowing the former the discovery of a new expression of the evangelical concern for the poorest and giving the latter a new dimension.

Hospitality

ANOTHER value through which the traditions of Christian monasticism and Indian ashrams can mutually be enriched—and for that very reason lead to inculturation—is that of hospitality.

Saint Benedict says that guests are never lacking in a monastery, and, faithful to a very long tradition before him, he invites his monks to practice a great charity and a very beautiful humaneness toward them, convinced that it is Christ whom they receive in these guests. The Indian ashram is also a place of welcome. It is a community that spontaneously takes shape around the spiritual experience of one person or a small group of persons. Whoever seeks the same thing may join this group, either for some days or for a much longer period.

At Kurisumala, there are always many guests. They are received soberly but with great hospitality. They gather in large numbers for all the offices in the chapel, and they share the meals of the community, taking

the same frugal nourishment with their hands, seated on the ground with their plate in front of them. Some join in the work of the community. All come together in the evening at the daily *satsangh*, a very important element in the life of an ashram.

The *satsangh* (literally ‘company of good persons’) is a common practice in all of India, going back to the *bhakti* poets of the medieval epoch. Even in our day, as soon as people find themselves together to seek human and spiritual growth, they unite under the direction of a master. They sing some *mantras* (brief prayers in Sanskrit), followed by sacred chants called *bhajans*, accompanied with music. This is generally followed by a reading from a sacred book, and often by a spiritual exhortation given by the master or another person present.

At Kurisumala, each evening after supper, before the last office of the day (which corresponds to our Compline), the community comes together with all the guests in the *satsangh* room, opposite the chapel. This *satsangh* is presided over by the superior or by a distinguished guest or even several guests who can be invited to speak. Then all go in silence to the chapel. After the superior’s blessing, given on the altar step, all, monks and guests, go to kiss the Bible, bowing before the altar and the Blessed Sacrament, and do the *arati*, stretching their hands above the lamp that burns before the icons and then bringing their hands to their eyes.

Conclusion

ROBERT TAFT, in the work cited above, analyzing the contribution of Kurisumala to the contemporary development of the Syriac office, underlines the fact that the inculturation of Kurisumala is much more than a liturgical reality. He writes:

In our day, in the West, much is written about the monastic renewal on Mount Athos and in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. However, during the last thirty years, another movement has quietly developed, perhaps less known, but undoubtedly one of the most radical and enlightened monastic experiments of our time.⁴

There is no true inculturation except one that involves all the aspects of life in a harmonious synthesis. Many monastic foundations were made during the last half-century in Africa, in Latin America, and in Asia. In most of these the founders showed a great openness to making necessary *adaptations* in the liturgical domain as well as in others, in order to ensure a successful implantation. However, in very few cases has anyone reached a true *inculturation* that leads to a new monastic culture resulting from the meeting of a long monastic tradition with the socio-cultural and religious situation of the place of implantation. The community of Kurisumala is an example in this area. It would be worthwhile to study its experiment at greater depth. In doing so we would no doubt understand that inculturation was not an end desired for itself, but really the fruit of a half-century of monastic experience rooted in western Christian tradition, open to the teachings of the eastern Christian tradition, and deeply respectful of the three-thousand-year-old monastic tradition of India.

This evolution happened outside the rigid structures of a monastic Order like that of Cîteaux, under the direction of a wise and open monk who first achieved this synthesis in his own spiritual life and experience. No doubt it could not have been otherwise. Now that the community

4. Citation according to the Italian edition: *La liturgia delle Ore in Oriente e in Occidente* (Turin: Edizioni Paoline, 1988) 319.

born from this experience has been incorporated into the Cistercian Order, with respect for its differences and its own rite, the challenge for the community of Kurisumala will be to lose nothing of its identity and of its own monastic culture, and the challenge for the Cistercian Order will be to make of this encounter a true inculturation in letting itself be transformed by this incorporation of a new element.

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