

Liturgy, the Sacred and Inculturation: A Missionary's Testimony

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I. Introduction to the mission: Mayumba, Gabon (Sub-Saharan Africa)

After spending a year as a teacher in Mouila, I have been a rural parish priest in Mayumba for the past 10 years. The mission comprises 10,000 souls spread across 20 villages and 8,500 km². The population is not particularly literate and has a reputation for being very fetishist and very traditionalist (in the African sense). However, there are long-standing Christians there who were formed by a former Catholic mission founded in 1888. Until the Council, they followed the old Roman Latin liturgy, then the reformed liturgy for nearly 30 years (from 1966 to 1992), with a return to the old Latin liturgy for the past 10 years.

The late 1960s were marked by the decline of the mission:

- the closure of its institutions one by one, including the main one, the boarding school
- the ageing of the missionary staff and a lack of new recruits
- a decline in the number of sacraments: the most significant being that of marriage (a hallmark of a Christian society), falling from around twenty a year to just a few, or even none at all
- the sisters had left, the priest was left alone, and the church had emptied
- the mission was abandoned, along with all its beautiful buildings

My arrival was a joy: it marked the return of the 'white' priests in cassocks, with Mass in Latin. This drew everyone in and brought the elderly Christians out of their shells; they who no longer attended Mass.

As if by providence, it was like a 'counter-revolution' for the local dignitaries, who resumed their rightful place in the church—that is to say, the front row—because they were familiar with this liturgy; it was their domain. The young people followed suit: 'We're getting ahead of the game,' they said!

From a mission that had been abandoned and was due to close, we have now returned to a mission—not a prosperous one, but at least one that is thriving, with:

- 120 baptisms a year
- 50 confirmations
- small churches being built (5)
- young people being educated and sanctified within the various movements

¹ Acts VIII. Versailles. 8–10 November 2002.

- schools (600 pupils) standing their ground and trying to uphold the honour of the Catholic Church

Whilst preparing this testimony, I recalled two anecdotes:

Called upon to bless a house belonging to two mothers (aged 70, one of whom was blind) after Communion, I began to sing ‘Asperges me . . .’ My two mothers joined in with me, then ‘Ostende nobis . . . et salutare tuum da nobis.’ ‘Domine exaudi . . . et clamor meus ad te veniat.’ They replied to me in Latin: this is the work of missionaries and the Sisters. They also asked me to say Masses for their son, including one in Rome (they are devoted to Rome). These mothers are thoroughly African in every way nature has endowed them, yet supernaturally Roman Catholic; I sensed beautiful souls behind their beautiful African faces.

At the same time, I’d invited a child to join us at the table and found it amusing to watch him eat his yoghurt. He made a little hole in it and gobbled it down – just like a coconut, of course! I stopped him. I said, ‘No, take the lid off and eat it with your little spoon.’ It made me laugh because I thought to myself that it was probably the first time he’d ever eaten yoghurt. It wasn’t part of his culture!

What am I getting at?

At a time when we’re keen to scrutinise everything that apparently has no roots in the local culture in order to downplay its value – such as education in the Roman Latin liturgy, which is supposedly too Western or European and therefore colonialist – who would think of removing yoghurt from Africa because they don’t know how to eat it with a teaspoon, or worse still, cars because Black people didn’t even invent the wheel, or even mobile phones on the pretext that long-distance communication was traditionally carried out to the beat of the tam-tams? It’s as if there are double standards: on the one hand, people go so far as to speak of enslavement and deculturation, and on the other, of progress! There must surely be a bit of magic at play here – not white magic, but black magic, a touch of witchcraft, the influence of evil spirits! Isn’t that so?

II. The Presence of the Roman Rite in Africa

‘The Gospel was proclaimed by missionaries who, at the same time, brought the Roman Rite’ ‘The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation’ (No. 6), Congregation for Divine Worship

How were evangelisation—and particularly the Roman spirit and the Roman Latin Mass—experienced in Africa, especially in our own country?

What was the spirit of the Church as a mother who gave birth to these Christian communities? Here are some documents from the period:

Mémorial du Congo français, July 1890

.Eagerly desiring that the Mission of the French Congo should, in every respect and everywhere, adhere solely to the purest doctrine of the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church; that it should know no other spirit nor any other practices than those of this holy Mother of all Churches, we have resolved to break entirely with a modern and exclusively French practice concerning the administration of the sacrament of Confirmation.

Since the beginning of this century, in fact, the practice has become established in France of administering this sacrament only to children who have received their First Communion. Yet this is a practice entirely contrary to what has been done throughout the Church from the time of the Apostles right up to our great revolution, a period during which France alone deviated from the common practice of the Church. (p. 209)

.Both white and black people wished to attend; the ceremonies (the ordination of the first indigenous priest and the minor orders), which took place with perfect harmony and majestic solemnity, made a deep impression on all those present, and especially on the young souls of our children. (p. 223)

Regulations governing the children's work in the Apostolic Vicariate of French Congo

(1890) The aim of this organisation is to provide all the children who belong to it with a Christian education that is genuinely suited to the needs of African society in the French Congo, and commensurate with the country's resources.

The current needs (1890) of African society in French Congo are those of any society founded on solid foundations, that is to say, on education and work.

Religious instruction shall be firmly and fundamentally Christian, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman. For it is the only one that contains the true, constitutive and unshakeable principles of societies. (p. 3)

As the Mission is a centre of civilisation and education, its honour demands that its leading pupils leave it with manners that are not only good, but also distinguished. The training and supervision of the waiters . . . (p. 15)

But what, then, was it that drove these missionaries? First and foremost, the desire to offer the Holy

Sacrifice of the Mass in order to apply the merits of Jesus Christ to the redemption of the pagans. The

redemption is effective: grace transforms; it does not destroy nature but elevates it. Even the least of non-believers becomes a new man through grace and his own efforts. This is borne out, for example, by the life of Bishop Le Roy: 'Au Kilomandjaro', p. 239, Auteuil, Paris

All night long, the Bishop had a fever; he is now utterly exhausted, yet for nothing in the world would he wish to miss this Mass which he promised to himself and to Africa; and the portable altar is set up, and the prayers begin; and the sacrifice is completed . . . wherever in the world the priest offers it, it undoubtedly has the same value everywhere; yet it seems that here, in the hands of a bishop (Bishop de Courmont!) sent by the Vicar of Jesus Christ to the most forsaken people on earth, and on the highest peak (at 3,600 metres) of the country they inhabit, it seems that the Holy Sacrifice implores God more earnestly for mercy and salvation.

May rivers of grace therefore flow down from there, as from a high spring, to all the missions of the Dark Continent, on the banks of which the flowers and fruits of Christian morality will flourish. (p. 239)

Or again, the journal of the missionaries from Algiers in Equatorial Africa: 'To the Assault on the Black Countries' (1884)

We anticipate that it will often be difficult for us to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass every day; but on Sundays we do not wish to fail to do so, and we wish to do so with all the solemnity that the circumstances of our journey allow. The first concern of our kind superiors, at the time of our departure, was to provide us with everything necessary for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. The Archbishop of Algiers has given us several of his vestments. The apostolic societies of Paris and Brussels have also provided us with several complete sets of chapel furnishings. The holy Carmelite nuns of Cité-Bugeaud, near Algiers, not only embroidered our beautiful banners of the Sacred Heart, which serve as rallying points for our caravans, but they also included sacred linens with them. Before setting off, we took our supply of wine and the flour needed to make the hosts. We therefore lack nothing to celebrate Holy Mass solemnly.

It was under our main tent, in accordance with the written instructions of His Grace the Archbishop, that we had set up the altar. The banners of the Sacred Heart fluttered above it. The High Mass was sung to the great amazement of our pagazis and our

askaris, who had never seen anything like it, but to whom we explained that this was our supreme form of prayer.

Or, finally, Father Briault:

‘Under the Equatorial Zero’, Bloud and Gay (1927)

the Father sets up his portable altar. Nothing conveys a sense of poverty, of austerity, of the bare minimum, quite like a portable altar. The Missal is the size of a breviary, the chalice is a toy made of imitation material, the candles are the size of a pencil, and even the Host is trimmed. As for the vestments, they still bear on the priest’s back the deep creases formed during their years of travel and the blurring of colours that wet red silk has left on the white damask. And yet, even the humblest Mass held beneath the thatched hut is solemn; the priest, barely clad in his tattered and shabby vestments, no longer speaks in the same voice he uses with the villagers. Even the last of the pagans realises this: the things taking place there are the things of God. And, amidst the silence that descends upon the village, the hut, whose wet roof smoulders in the rays of dawn, is as if transfigured. (Understand! Not the things of Europe or Africa, but the things of God.)

Les Sauvages d’Afrique, Payot (1943)

At major festivals, the catechist brings all his catechumens to the parish church, and all these poor savages, standing before the illuminations of a Christmas or Easter service, or before a solemn First Communion, believe themselves, like the Franks of Clovis, to have been transported to Paradise. On their return, they are seized by a passionate desire to enter this ‘Church of souls’, which stirs to life only the very best in man (p. 290).

One might think that the local people receive this instruction passively; nothing could be further from the truth—they participate wholeheartedly:

Teachers’ Handbook – Loango 1892

All teachers must be able to sing well enough to teach their pupils the French or Fiote (indigenous languages) songs and hymns, etc., most commonly used in the Mission. All must also be familiar with the principles of Christian courtesy so as to teach them to their pupils, as well as the principal Church ceremonies specific to the faithful, and in particular, how to respond during Mass and assist the priest at the altar (p. 8).

Rev. Briault – *Sous le zéro équatorial*, Bloud et Gay (1927)

African churches are the setting for a form of worship so devout, so dignified, that it invariably astounds new missionaries. Even the simple celebration of a low Mass is a marvel. The young Black boy who serves at Mass, wearing a red cassock falling straight to his bare feet and a light, immaculately white chasuble, does not omit a single greeting, does not

‘mumbles’ a single word of the Latin text, and he performs every task with the solemnity of a consummate seminarian. An episcopal service conducted with the assistance of a group of our young Christians is a marvel of precision and order; whereas everywhere else, order and decorum are the things most difficult to obtain from Black people. Clearly, faith reigns and grace is at work, and it is both these, as well as the race’s natural aptitude for music, that enable our African choirs to assimilate our Gregorian melodies so swiftly and so accurately (pp. 49–50).

Koren – The Spiritans (Paris -- 1982)

A spectacular liturgy made a deep impression on Africans: it helped them to recognise the reality of the supernatural mysteries. Care was taken to ensure that everyone took part. Our Western Churches would have had much to learn from this. ‘Gregorian chant’ in particular was most often sung with impressive enthusiasm and true beauty of execution (p. 519).

It is worth noting the particular care taken with sacred music. In boarding schools, plainchant was taught five days a week. Even today, requiem masses are sung from memory. The faithful have a great aptitude for learning. I have heard four-year-olds singing the Regina Coeli. In all our primary schools, pupils learn the Kyrie and the Antiphons to the Blessed Virgin (Salve Regina. . .)

Opinions at the time were unanimous: the Roman liturgy touched people’s souls. A gentleman recently told me that, for his mother, ‘Jesus was not born that Christmas, because they hadn’t sung the “Puer Natus” in church’. So the black congregation understood, took part in, and truly lived this liturgy. The Mayor told me that when the ‘Veni Sancte Spiritus’ was sung, one could feel God descending from Heaven. Another confided in me: of course we didn’t understand, but we knew it was for God. Does this not echo Cardinal Ratzinger’s words: ‘Even if the participants probably do not understand all the words, they perceive their profound meaning, the presence of the mystery that transcends all words.’ (Liturgy and Mission, CIEL p. 77)

And this liturgy was beginning to bear fruit, as attested by *The Soul of the Peoples to be Evangelised*, Leuven – 1918:

The Mass: This magnificent expression of piety among Black Africans is only just beginning, but we can already see the fruits that future generations will reap, provided that the missionaries keep the sacred fire burning in these still-young hearts. See with what devotion they attend the divine mysteries every morning (p. 85).

A modern mind might logically ask the following question: did we want to turn them into ‘little white people’? To transform them according to our Western standards? No, for above all, the work accomplished was a truly African endeavour.

A report on the work with children in the Apostolic Vicariate of French Congo (1890):

We must ask of these young Africans only what they are capable of giving, but we must ask them for everything they are capable of giving. We must carry out an African endeavour with them, both in substance and in form... We must take into account the customs and habits of these peoples. This is so that we may preserve all that is good or neutral in them, whilst imparting our virtues without introducing our faults. We must create an African endeavour, enriched by what is good and appropriate for Africa within European civilisation and, above all, within Christian civilisation. But to seek to do in Africa what is done in Europe, and in the same way, is to be grossly mistaken and certainly to miss the mark. For Africa is not, and never will be, Europe: its climate and produce will never be the same as ours; the black race will never be the white race; therefore, housing, clothing, food and education cannot be the same. The strengths and weaknesses of black people are not the same as those of white people. Therefore, white and black people must not be treated in the same way, nor receive the same education (pp. 4–5).

Hence the priority given to the training of indigenous clergy (the missionaries have always taken their instructions from Rome):

It is certain that the Mission can never be evangelised without the assistance of indigenous apostolic personnel... (page 9).

The missionaries themselves sought to avoid imposing a colonial model, as stated by Bishop Truffet, quoted by Pitra in his **Life of the Venerable Libermann**: ‘We are not going to establish in Africa Italy, France, or any other part of Europe, but solely the Holy Roman Church, apart from any nationality and any human system. With the grace

of God, we strip ourselves of all that is merely European, retaining only the teachings of the Church, which are those of God.”

This is simply an echo of St Paul’s words: ‘I have become all things to all people, so that I might win them all to Jesus Christ.’ 1 Cor. 9:22

Does not Father Libermann (Letters 1840) say:

‘Do not judge by what you have seen in Europe... cast off Europe, its customs, its spirit. Become like the Negroes amongst the Negroes to form them as they ought to be, not in the European way but by leaving them what is their own; adapt yourselves to them as servants must adapt to their masters, to the customs, character and habits of their masters, and this in order to perfect them, sanctify them, lift them out of their lowly state, and gradually, in the long run, make them a people of God.’

Thus, the missionaries implicitly rule out the idea that the liturgy is part of a European trend: the Roman liturgy is not European, Western or colonial; it belongs to a different order. The Roman Catholic Church, overly concerned not to import a colonial model, introduces the Roman rite without any contradiction. This is fundamental and relates to an understanding of what the liturgy is, which is essentially a submission, an obedience (as St Paul says) to an external principle.

III. The question of inculturation

What is inculturation, and what is its purpose?

This neologism, adopted by the General Congregation of the Jesuits in 1973, has become the watchword of the new evangelisation in mission countries, the sieve through which the entire history of the missions is re-examined.

Thus Cardinal Sepe spoke at the commemorations of St Thomas and St Francis Xavier in India on 16–17 November 2002:

‘The Christians of St Thomas faithfully preserved the Gospel message, fully inculturating the faith into the local culture. Because of this inculturation, the Christians of St Thomas were not regarded as followers of a foreign religion. After all, Jesus came from Asia. They were fully Christian in their faith and Indian in their culture. . . . St Francis Xavier understood the importance of becoming one with others, of being inculturated.’

The document from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: 'The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation' (abbreviated to LRI) notes:

The constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* spoke of the adaptation of the liturgy. Subsequently, the Magisterium of the Church has used the term 'inculturation' to denote, more precisely, 'the incarnation of the Gospel in indigenous cultures and, at the same time, the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church' (LRI No. 4).

Thus, just as the Word became flesh (skin, colour . . .), Revelation takes on a human face (Jewish, Greek . . .) according to the form it assumes in each culture.

'Inculturation signifies an intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the rooting of Christianity in the various human cultures.'

If the aim is to find roots for Christianity within different cultures, this is called 'foundational stones', the 'seeds of the Word'. If the aim is to bring Christianity into cultures, this is called 'evangelisation', 'conversion'. . . The term 'inculturation' denotes a twofold movement: 'The Church embodies the Gospel in the various cultures and, at the same time, brings peoples and their cultures into her own community . . . as if to be enriched by the wisdom of the nations.' (LRI Nos. 4–6)

In light of the very definition and purpose of inculturation, and drawing on the first part of my lecture and my own limited experience, it seems to me that the presence of the traditional Roman Rite, as received during the initial evangelisation, should be regarded not as an obstacle, but rather as an opportunity for the Church and for Africa in particular.

1. *The traditional Roman Rite is perfectly suited to the needs of the Bantu soul.*

Christ in Gabon – Leuven, (1931)

'The Bantu soul is deeply religious. Far from repelling it, the supernatural attracts it and fulfils a need, for in it the soul finds an explanation for all its wonders. Everything in its beliefs and traditions predisposes the Black person to the marvellous. The mystery that deters so many rational, civilised people does not stop him on the path of Faith. He never questions what he does not understand.' (p.56)

Spiritus No. 8, (1961) Quote from the first Congolese priest (DRC) in the **Revue Congolaise** (1917), in which he analysed his own reactions and those of the first seminarians to the study of scholastic philosophy:

‘Philosophy lies naturally within us. We sensed these things long ago. We asked ourselves questions, but we did not know the path that would lead us out of our anxieties. Now our minds are at peace.’

a) Universality and unity

The transcendence of the Roman rite is now well established: it draws upon both the East and the West. It has been refined over the centuries and upheld by all the Popes who worked for the unity of the Church throughout the world. This monument, classified as ‘the common heritage of humanity’, which incorporates silence and mystery into a sacred language belonging to no single country, transcends time and borders, as well as cultural contingencies, to enter into communion with the living and true God, and to begin the eternal praise of heaven, where there are no longer any races or nations. Africans are deeply moved by this ability they have to participate, through this rite, in the universality of the Roman Church. One of the strongest arguments is to tell them: here, Mass (in Latin) is just like in Rome; it is just as it is with the Pope.

One day a doctor asked me for a catechism book. I showed him the standard one:

‘Jesus in Africa’. He did not like the title, as if this form of Christianity were diminished, truncated, or adapted!

The argument that diversity is a source of richness is often an *ad hominem* argument. In fact, unity—a divine attribute and a mark of universality—is a greater source of richness. Africans suffer from being marginalised. An African rite may flatter them for a while, but they will soon tire of it.

b) Its traditional value

Black people live solely by tradition: their country is founded on tradition, as are their prosperity, their earthly and immortal happiness, their very existence, their health, their plantations... What black people have inherited from their ancestors is sacred and perfect: it is custom! (Moreover, he never asks himself why or how). Thus, one of the grievances that could be levelled against the Christian religion was that it disrupted this custom (but did we not already see this in the time of Jesus and the Roman Empire. . .!) Yet the early missionaries left such a deep mark on people’s minds and hearts that today they are seen as nothing other than heroes and saints, the Founding Fathers: ‘Ah, the Fathers of yesteryear—they’re not like the ones of today!’

The traditional Roman rite derives its strength and success today from its traditional value: it is part of the African collective memory. Often, all I need to say is: ‘Did we used to do that at the Mission? Did the Fathers do that?’

We find this traditional common sense in President Bongo's words: 'It is ridiculous to want to rewrite history, to erase a period from memory in order to rediscover I don't know what roots. Gabon was colonised by France... France is one of Gabon's roots, one of its constituent parts. That is a fact, and we must respect the facts. We must not break with the past.' in **Blanc comme Nègre**, Grasset 2001 (p. 85).

c) The expression of African cultural values

'Africans have a deep sense of religion, a sense of the sacred, a sense of the existence of God the Creator and of a spiritual world (the world of spirits). The reality of sin, in its individual and social forms, is very much present in the consciousness of these peoples, as are rites of purification and atonement. ' Apostolic Exhortation **Ecclesia in Africa** (1995), No. 42.

Furthermore, Chief Amadou Gasseto, a high priest (sorcerer) of Voodoo in Benin and a guest at Assisi, recalled: 'It is a matter of making amends for the harm done to creation through human responsibility, of asking forgiveness from the guardian spirits of the areas affected by violence and by the evil committed by humans, of performing sacrificial rites of reparation and purification, and thus restoring peace.' **Osservatore Romano**, 5 February 2002.

Where best can one find, in which rite and in which theology, the expression of these values of African culture (today; there are still pagan rites involving the sacrifice of animals—roosters, sheep, even humans, as in the Bwiti tradition)—if not in the Roman rite and the traditional theology of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, of the Lamb of God, the expiatory, propitiatory and Eucharistic victim immolated upon our altars?

Moreover, if the altar can be called the 'table of the Lord', it would be fitting for priests to receive Communion versus ad Dominum, in the manner of chiefs who take their meals out of sight, in seclusion!

It is therefore false and harmful to believe, or to lead others to believe, that the traditional Roman liturgy is alien to the African soul. The Church, as Mother, has known how to touch the souls of her children. The work of inculturation, in all that is right and useful about it, began with the arrival of the first missionaries. For Africans to participate and understand, it was not necessary to change the way things were done.

If one wishes to complain about the slowness of their profound conversion, or their attachment to certain customs incompatible with the Gospel, one must—so as not to become discouraged—remember that it has been the same for all peoples, kingdoms and empires. It is not
100 or

150 years of evangelisation are enough to transform a pagan society into a Christian one. History teaches us this. Christian institutions would also be needed.

2. The dangers of a misunderstood inculturation

Inculturation, viewed as a new ideology, can undermine the foundations of missionary work. Indeed, one must not base oneself on a false principle that separates Revelation (the deposit of the Faith) from its expression (its form), which would then depend on cultures, consciences and experiences. Religion would no longer be a real, objective thing, because

‘universalis, perennis, communis’—as is said of Thomist philosophy—and which must be taught, received, applied and explored in depth, here and now; rather, it would then be up to religion itself to ‘adapt to the temperaments and circumstances of different peoples, right down to its rites’.

We need to reflect on the intellectual, historical and philosophical origins (decolonisation, Marxism, liberalism, subjectivism . . .) of this reversal of principles and its consequences. Such a philosophy often leads to contempt for a ‘outdated’ theology of the salvation of souls.

Cardinal Sepe, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, had already asserted that the ‘principle of truth cannot be governed solely by the “cultural way” of feeling, and that inculturation must not be the ultimate criterion of truth with regard to God’s Revelation’ (OR, 15 October 2002).

We are already witnessing in Africa a proliferation of syncretism (not to mention the conversion of Christians to Islam!) and the resurgence of paganism.

For us, true inculturation, together with the priorities of transmitting the Faith, the unity of the Church, and the sanctification of souls, will ensure that our beloved rite, within this context of experiences and explorations, will always be not a step backwards but an opportunity: it will be like the cross (crux stat), the landmark, the beacon, rising above a troubled and turbulent world. Moreover, it will also be a pledge of Africa’s love for the Church of Rome, which is the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ and which holds the promises of eternal life.