

Cultural Catholics, Popular Piety and Inculturation: A Vision for Meaningful Encounter

“The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times.” Blessed Pope Paul VI penned these prophetic words in 1975 in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelization of the Modern World*. He goes on to say: “Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel”¹

More than 40 years later, the disconnect between the Gospel and culture continues to loom large as a defining drama for the Church. A recent study by the Pew Research Institute (September 15, 2015) highlights that 52% of adults raised in the United States Catholic have, at some point, left the Catholic Church. Of this 52%, a small percentage, 11% have returned to the Church. Of the remaining 41%, 28% consider themselves no longer Catholic in any way. The remaining 13% are cultural Catholics who self-identify as Catholic but do not practice the faith or who now worship in another faith tradition. Of this 41%, only 8% say they can imagine returning to Catholicism. Cultural Catholics make up a significantly higher percentage (43%) of those who would consider returning to the Church.²

Traditional modes and models of catechesis - as experienced in the Sunday homily, in adult formation and children and youth ministry programs - simply cannot reach cultural Catholics and those nominally practicing the faith who do not come on to Church property. Therefore, catechetical leaders need to, once again, scrutinize “the signs of the times”³ through

¹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelization in the Modern World* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975) 20.

² See finding and graphs at: Pew Research Institute, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/15/half-of-u-s-adults-raised-catholic-have-left-the-church-at-some-point/>

³ Pope Paul VI, “Gaudium et spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” Vatican: the Holy See. Rome, 7 December 1965, 4. Web. 29 February 2016.

the light of the Gospel to consider how best to bring people into a personal encounter with Christ and his Church. This essay suggests that attentiveness to the popular piety of those in our community and conscientious application of the best principals of inculturation may aid us in the task of calling our cultural Catholics home.

After clarifying terms, this paper will consider the interrelated, yet distinct roles of evangelization and catechesis in order to propose evangelizing catechesis as a model for formation that brings Catholics back to the ecclesial community. Secondly, this paper will briefly explore the vast teachings of the Church to better understand the role of popular piety and inculturation. The paper will conclude by considering ways that authentic popular piety and inculturation could be a means to reach the 43% of cultural Catholics and encourage them to reconsider the Church.

Situating the Conversation: Terms and Working Definitions

For the scope of this discussion, the term “Cultural Catholic” is applied to those individuals who *self*-identify as Catholic: they acknowledge Catholic tradition and understand it as part of their heritage, but who do not actively participate in the sacraments or practice the faith. In this essay popular piety is understood as an acknowledged (or un-acknowledged) thirst for God that expresses itself through ritual. These communal actions reflect an awareness of the transcendent in everyday life and allow for some expression of the sacramental life of the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes “veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, religious dances, the rosary, medals, etc.,”⁴ as among popular piety. Inculturation, for discussion in this essay, is understood

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana) 1674.

as the process wherein the people of God pause to reflect on the culture in which they find themselves; drawing particularly on those aspects where the Gospel message may most likely be made manifest and, in return, how culture can enrich the Church. Saint John Paul II described this succinctly when he described inculturation as “the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church.”⁵

The New Evangelization: Evangelization and Catechesis Enriching Each Other

Jesus’ final words to his disciples to “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19a) requires that evangelization and catechesis work together to fan the flames of initial conversion into a life of discipleship. Ultimately, both evangelization and catechesis have entry into the ecclesial community through adherence to the Word, and acceptance of the sacraments as their goal: discipleship. At the same time, it is clear that there are distinguishing characteristics between evangelization and catechesis. It is also evident that the two are rarely completely independent activities. The *General Directory of Catechesis (GDC)* provides the following clarification of the differences between catechesis and evangelization: "All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ. Starting with the 'initial' conversion of a person to the Lord, moved by the Holy Spirit through the primary proclamation of the Gospel, catechesis seeks to solidify and mature this first adherence."⁶ The proclamation of the life, death and resurrection of Christ should permeate all aspects of liturgy, Church teachings and Christian living. As such, the conclusions in this paper proceed from an understanding of evangelization and catechesis working together to reengage cultural Catholics

⁵ John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, June 2, 1985. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1 March 2016, <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp_ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli_en.html> 21.

⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1998) 80.

through well-catechized popular piety and evangelization efforts infused with an inculturating vision.

Popular Piety: Religion of the People⁷

The “spiritual but not religious” identity claimed by many people today reflects a privatization of lived faith and, at the same time, the impulse for the transcendent that resides in every human heart. For cultural Catholics, acts of popular piety may be the means that expresses this religious sentiment outside the ecclesial community. Accordingly, popular piety is not without pitfalls. Pope Paul VI reminds us that popular religiosity has limits, “it is often subject to penetration by many distortions of religion and superstitions.”⁸ He goes on to say, “it frequently remains at the level of forms of worship not involving a true acceptance of the faith.”⁹ Mindful of the problems that can befall popular piety, the Church asserts that authentic popular piety always draws from the liturgical life of the Church and leads back to the Liturgy.

In light of the teachings of the second Vatican Council, particularly *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Popes Paul VI, Saint John Paul II and Pope Francis, have given renewed consideration to the potential transformative power of popular piety. The pontiffs contend that popular piety is particularly effective in reaching people who may be on the margins of faith. Cultural Catholics represent a margin of the Church today. Speaking of the evangelizing power of popular piety Pope Francis says: “Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization.”¹⁰ Catechesis on

⁷ This clarifying phrase is used by Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 48.

⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 48.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) 126.

popular piety, particularly those practices that can strengthen a sacramental worldview, may help individuals envision a sacred horizon in the secular worldview.

Because popular piety is lived in the world it provides a point of encounter that allows catechesis and evangelization to put some distance between formation and the classroom; to reach people where they are spiritually and physically. While not diminishing the need for intentional catechesis, the Church must strive to form and transform and as much as it informs. Saint John Paul II speaks of the danger of gnostic faith that merely informs: "In our heavily secularized world a 'gradual secularization of salvation' has taken place, so that people strive for the good of man, but man who is truncated, reduced to his merely horizontal dimension."¹¹ Through its customs and traditions, popular piety predisposes individuals for a more authentic encounter with Christ and can open one's horizon to include the transcendent. The practice of various forms of popular piety is intrinsic to Catholic identity and therefore, it can be a means to bring cultural Catholics back to the ecclesial community.

Inculturation:

Echoing *Redemptoris Missio*, the *General Directory for Catechesis* calls inculturation of the faith "a wonderful exchange," it goes on to say this is a "profound and global process and a slow journey."¹² Echoing his predecessors, Pope Francis has spoken of the imperative to evangelize culture so the Gospel may take root.¹³ This is the very core of inculturation which seeks to integrate Christianity and the culture at large. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI asserts that evangelization "means bringing the Good News into all the

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, Vatican Encyclicals Online., 1 March 2016 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html> (accessed March 1, 2009) 11.

¹² *General Directory for Catechesis*, 109.

¹³ See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, see paragraphs 68-70.

strata of humanity,"¹⁴ in ways comprehensible with the various cultures, and at the same time remain faithful to the teachings of Christ. It is clear that inculturation is not a program aimed merely at institutional survival; rather the aim is *metanoia* of individuals and culture which results in a radical change of heart that leads to conversion to the Gospel of Christ. It is the making of disciples which, in turn, integrates Christianity and culture. Given the challenge to permeate every strata of humanity with the Good News, laity are in the privileged position to inculturate the Gospel in the specific time and place in which they live.

In the work of inculturation, the Church is able to bring forth the Marks of the Church which are both the core of her identity and her mission: one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. Inculturation seeks not to confront culture and change it indiscriminately; rather, the Body of Christ, must watch, listen, and pray to discern what is good and true in the culture in order to identify practices and strategies to enrich culture with the Gospel. In the process, the ecclesial community is enriched with the good and beautiful, as created by God, found in the culture. Saint John Paul II says of the Church: "She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission."¹⁵

Before turning to the practical implications of popular piety and inculturation today, Pope Francis provides synthesis for the relationship between popular piety and inculturation:

"Underlying popular piety, as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel, is an active evangelizing power which we must not underestimate: to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, we are called to promote and strengthen it, in order to deepen the never-ending

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 18.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 52.

process of inculturation.”¹⁶ With this relational vision of popular piety as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel guiding the conversation, consideration can be given to the practical implications of popular piety and inculturation for evangelizing catechesis.

Putting Popular Piety and Inculturation in to Practice

Evangelization and catechesis in the 21st century entails that those exercising ministries be flexible, adaptable and sensitive to the needs of those to whom they are reaching out. Drawing upon the ancient practices of popular piety and inculturation, the Church has at her disposal tools that are both flexible and adaptable for the multi-cultural, diverse Church of the United States today.

Popular piety and inculturation provide flexibility and creativity in reaching cultural Catholics and serve well the essential role of laity outlined in *Ad Gentes*. Transformation of culture from within must be the work of those who are actively living in the heart of culture: "therefore worthy of special attention are the Christian laity: namely, those who have been incorporated into Christ and live in the world. For it is up to them, imbued with the spirit of Christ, to be a leaven working on the temporal order from within, to dispose it always in accordance with Christ."¹⁷

Therefore, at the most basic level, evangelization and catechesis will never be truly effective unless the evangelizers, that is, *all* the People of God are living a deep personal relationship with Christ. John Paul II makes this basic premise abundantly clear: "We cannot

¹⁶ Pope Francis, 126f.

¹⁷ Paul VI, Pope. *Ad Gentes on the Mission Activity of the Church*. 7 December 1965, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 20 February 2016, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/Documents/vatii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html> 15.

preach conversion unless we ourselves are converted anew each day!"¹⁸ It is essential for the faithful to nurture their own faith, delving ever deeper into the Mystery of Christ, so that they may encourage and inspire others. Lay catechists and parish leaders should explore the popular practices that inspire their own spirituality to ensure that these practices draw them closer to the Church, even as these practices serve to reach cultural Catholics that they may encounter.

Popular piety must be well understood as stemming from and leading back to liturgy.

Additionally, all who seek to evangelize must be open to the true, good and beautiful aspects of culture that can present opportunities for encounter.

Considering how best to employ popular piety and inculturation strategies will require long-term visioning and creative proclamation of the Gospel. The mentality of scheduled time and event planning must be suspended as truly taking the time to study and listen to the culture must take place before strategies are put in place. However, flexibility and study do not mean we do not plan. The opposite is true: planning must be more intentional to make sure that being open does not end in nothing being done.

In 2001, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments produced the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy Principles and Guidelines*. This comprehensive document identifies emerging trends “necessary for the harmonization of Liturgy and popular piety,”¹⁹ as such; it offers practical proposals for the practice of popular piety. Any diocese or parish seriously contemplating popular piety as an outreach to cultural Catholics should engage in significant study of this document. Pope Paul VI asserts, “In countries of

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 47.

¹⁹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, “Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy Principles and Guidelines,” December 2001, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 25 February 2016, <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_ver_s-direttorio_en.html>, 4.

Catholic tradition, this means encouraging, fostering and reinforcing a richness which already exists.”²⁰ Consideration will also include identification of practices that appear to be corrupted, followed by careful and respectful catechesis so they may be “patiently and prudently purified”²¹ to better draw individuals into authentic communion with Christ and his Church. If there are no identifiable practices of popular piety, or a diocese chooses to reintroduce a form of popular piety, *The Directory on Popular Piety* may be used to identify practices that would fit well with the population and culture.

Inculturation requires humility and wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit. To apprentice the work of inculturation, attention should be given to the work of such saints as: St. Augustine of Canterbury, St. Patrick and Sts. Cyril and Methodius, who modeled inculturation in their respective times and places. Saint John Paul II, in *Slavorum Apostoli*, points to the power of inculturation in the work of Sts. Cyril and Methodius: “I especially wish to emphasize is the peaceful way in which they built up the Church, guided as they were by their vision of the Church as one, holy and universal.”²² At the same time, in the process of transforming individual and collective consciences, the Church, through the proclamation of the Gospel is “affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.”²³

If the spiritual but not religious tenet holds up, disenfranchisement appears to have more to do with lack of trust in the institution, than with professed atheism. *The General Directory for*

²⁰ Pope Francis, 69.

²¹ *Ibid*, 5.

²² John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 12.

²³ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19.

Catechesis suggests that the Catechumenate should be a “center of inculturation”²⁴ so that those who participate are able to “give a reason for their hope” (1 Peter 3:15) in cultures that may be hostile to Christianity. Likewise, cultural Catholics may be inspired by a presentation of the Gospel that is not diluted, but “incorporates with discernment, the language, symbols, and values of the culture” in which they live.”²⁵ This is both an affirming and challenging of the culture at large. It requires the grace of the Holy Spirit.

A final suggestion when incorporating popular piety and inculturation in catechetical efforts is that evangelizers and catechists understand themselves as mystagogues. From this stance, evangelists and catechists serve as guides for imagination, helping the individual or culture to reassemble fragmentary memories into a meaningful Catholic belief system. Founded in the Paschal Mystery, placed in biblical and historical contexts and drawing upon symbolism as well as traditional ritual elements, mystagogy can foster imagination. Mystagogy should be appropriate to the community: the ecclesial, social and political concerns of the hearers.

As we answer the call to the Great Commission to “go and make disciples”, it seems fitting to end with the "punch line" as it were of Jesus' words to the disciples: "and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 20:13b). In *all* our efforts of evangelization and catechesis, it is necessary to remember that promptings and actions of the Holy Spirit are the source guiding all endeavors and bringing them to fruition. “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.”²⁶

²⁴ General Directory for Catechesis, 110.

²⁵ General Directory for Catechesis, 110.

²⁶ Traditional Pentecost prayer “Come Holy Spirit.”

Annotated Bibliography

Papal Documents:

Pope Paul VI. "Ad Gentes: On the Missionary Activity of the Church." Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. Collegeville, IN: The Liturgical Press, 1992. 813-862.

This is the Second Vatican Council decree on missionary activity. Issued in 1965, it lays down the constant and fundamental principle of the Church's necessity to proclaim the Gospel to all people. It serves as the foundation when studying contemporary documents on evangelization. As the name implies, "Go out to the nations," it is primarily focused on foreign missions and speaks at length on the necessity of inculturation. It calls for a spirit of cooperation urging all the People of God to interior renewal and of their responsibility to spread the Gospel.

---. Gaudium et Spes: Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. Ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992. 903-1001.

This papal encyclical, issued on the final day of the Second Vatican Council, firmly places the life of the Church in the life of the world. This encyclical acknowledges that while the Church has much to offer the world, its true aim is the salvation of all humankind. The dignity of every human person is the point of departure for document.

---. Evangelii Nuntiandi: On Evangelization in the Modern World. 9 December 1975. Frederick: The Word Among Us Press, 2015.

Written ten years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, this apostolic exhortation identified evangelization as the Church's "deepest identity," the heart of her vocation. The document asserts that evangelization must go deeper than merely presenting the Good News; it must strive to bring about transformation in both believers and non-believers.

John Paul II. Redemptoris missio: On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate. Papal Encyclicals Online." Vatican: the Holy See 7 December 1990. 27 February 2016 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html>.

Written in 1990 by John Paul II, this papal encyclical reiterates the "urgency of missionary activity," citing themes from both *Ad Gentes* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. John Paul II calls for the Church to renew her missionary activity, "for the Gospel is still unknown by many people." This document is directed to missionary activity (rather than the new evangelization): thus, there is considerable effort given to the tenets of inculturation.

---. Slavorum Apostoli. June 2, 1985. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 1 March 2016. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp_ii_enc_19850602_slavorum-apostoli_en.html>.

Written by John Paul II in 1985, this document honors St. Cyril and Methodius on the 11th centenary of their evangelizing efforts. John Paul highlights their contribution as a model for evangelizing efforts today, namely: proclaiming the Gospel in “friendly coexistence,” mindful of the dignity of every nation all the while seeking to draw them into the Church. While their approach was novel at the time, the Church has come to identify their missionary activity as “inculturation.”

Pope Francis. Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel. Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013.

This apostolic exhortation challenges all members the Church to go out of herself to proclaim, with joy of Jesus’s love. The pope uses the remainder of the document to suggest this should be done in a “missionary key” that is creative in rethinking the goals and methods of evangelization. Through this lens the Gospel can be repropounded in a manner that gives it “meaning, beauty and attractiveness.” This document is enriched by the contributions of the 2012 synod on “The new evangelization for the transmission of the faith.”

Church Documents

Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments. Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy Principles and Guidelines. December, 2001. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 25 February 2016.

<http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html>.

Written as a resource for Bishops and his collaborators, this lengthy document is comprised of two parts: “Emerging Trends” and “Guidelines”. Historical trends, theological principles and the relationship between liturgy and popular piety are the focus of the first part. The latter provides an extensive list of expressions of popular piety, Biblical references for various practices, an index of people and/or places associated with popular piety and a glossary of terms. All of which are presented in order to utilize popular piety as a mean to promote a lively liturgical life among the faithful.

Catholic Church. Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000.

Congregation for the Clergy. General Directory for Catechesis. Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1998.