Interculturality as Context for Education (1/3)

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As we approach the theme of interculturality, it may be well to begin with some general observations on the nature of culture from both an anthropological and a theological perspective. Etymologically, the word "culture" is derived from the same root as "cultivation." That is why even today we speak of "agri*culture*." And this etymological connection has its root in reality, for culture is the result of cultivation. Cultivation is the process whereby humans respond to the challenges and opportunities of the environment in order to meet the first basic necessity of life, the need for food. Therefore, a culture is first of all the manner in which a particular group in a certain environment finds ways to produce food —and then, by extension, to meet other necessities of life, such as shelter, clothing, communication, etc. Such necessities are common to all humankind, and therefore underlying all cultures, and joining them, is the common humanity of all. It is mostly the different environments, and then the various responses to such environments, that result in the development of different cultures.

But the word "culture" is also related to the word "cultus" —from which we derive words such as "cultic" and "cult." Unfortunately, in today's common usage, we reserve the word "cult" for the weird and the fanatical. But in truth all worship is cultic, and therefore when I here use the word "cult" I do not mean the fringe groups that we classify as cults, but the entire gamut of religious experiences and religious expressions that characterize a particular human group. Cult,

[1] At the request of the organizers of the conculstiation, much of this material in the first lecture has been taken from my book *Culto, cultura y cultivo* (Lima: Puma, 2008).

like cultivation, is grounded on the basic needs of all human groups —in this case, the need for meaning, for interpretation, the need to confront the mystery of life and death.

All of this means that cultures are by their very nature dialogical. A culture is born out of a dialogue with the environment and with the mysteries of life. Because the environments vary, cultures vary. And, because the environment evolves, cultures also evolve. When they cross the Red Sea, the people of Israel, accustomed to living as slaves in sedentary Egypt, have to learn how to live as free nomads in the desert. And then, when they cross the Jordan, they have to learn how to tend vineyards and olive trees and fig trees. Roman culture, originally the culture of a city-state, has to evolve as it becomes the culture of an empire. Western European culture, brought to these lands, evolves into a new culture. In all of these processes there is both continuity and change. As long as it survives, the culture of the people of Israel, and of Rome, and of Western Europe remains true to itself through all these changes.

This is to say that cultures are living realities. Like any living being, the moment cultures cease to change they begin to die. And, like ourselves, cultures retain their identity while changing. As a human child becomes an adult, much changes, but it is still the same person. As the adult grows into senectude, much changes, but it is still the same person. As we die, we change once more, now to live in new ways so different from the present that faith can only dimly imagine what we shall be. And yet, we shall remain the same. Life is a process of change in the midst of identity, and of identity in the midst of change. And so is culture.

Precisely because they have this identity even in the midst of change, cultures also provide a sense of identity for those who are oppressed by other cultures. In the high Andes, much remains of ancient Incaic culture. People still speak the ancient quechua language —even when they also know Spanish— and cling to many of their traditions, customs and ceremonies —even when many of these have been integrated into the Christianity of the region. When Alexander Duff undertook the task of teaching Western technology and knowledge to people in India, he claimed that he was planting under traditional Indian culture a bomb so powerful that it would shake that culture to its foundation, and thus open the way for a general acceptance of Christianity. As someone has commented, what actually happened was that the bomb did explode, but Indian culture was built on sand that could absorb the shock, and therefore, while adopting Western technology, Hindu culture —even though much changed— is now stronger than ever. In this country, people say that Latinos and Latinas do not wish to learn English. But the truth is that most of them are willing to learn English, as long as that does not mean forgetting their roots. And thus a new version of Spanish —what some would pejoratively call "Spanglish"— begins to evolve.

In short, cultures provide a sense of identity to people, and in the case of those who are oppressed or marginalized, it provides them with power to continue the struggle for survival, for being who they are.

But, precisely because cultures evolve, and because much of that evolution takes place in a context of violence and oppression, cultures also carry within themselves the vestige and often the memory of former oppressions. The reason why I speak Spanish goes back to the time when my Roman ancestors conquered and oppressed my Celtiberian ancestors. And the reason why I do not eat “fromage” or “fromagio,” but rather “queso” —which is akin to the German “Kaese” and the English “cheese”— is that my Visigothic ancestors conquered my Roman ancestors. And then, when I see an arachnid with a stinger I may call it an “escorpión,” much as you would call it a “scorpion,” because both your ancestors and mine were conquered by the Romans; but I may also call it an “alacrán,” which comes from the Arabic “al charab,” because my Arabic ancestors conquered and oppressed my Visigothic ancestors. And the reason why I call myself “yo,” and not “eo” or “iu,” is that my Castilian ancestors conquered and oppressed my other Spanish ancestors. And the reason why many of my people build “bohíos” and eat “aguacate” is that my Spanish ancestors conquered and oppressed my native American ancestors. And the reason why I eat “guineos” and “quimbombó” is that my grandfather had an African slave.

All of this is not pretty. But still, it distills the history that has formed me, and I cannot let go of it without letting go of much of my identity.

The same is true of every culture. Have you ever noticed that in English we have one word for a live animal and another for its meat? What in the field was a steer, in coming to the table becomes beef. What in the herd was a sheep, on the table is mutton. What in the sty was a hog,

is now served as pork. Furthermore, have you noticed that the names for the live animals —steer, sheep, hog— all have Anglo-Saxon roots, while the names for their meat all have Franco-Norman roots —beef/boeuf, mutton/mutton, pork/porc? When you look at these names, it becomes clear who raised the animals and who ate them. In other words, the reason why you feed steers and cows, but eat beef, is that your Franco-Norman ancestors conquered and oppressed your Anglo-Saxon ancestors.

This is why culture cuts both ways. On the one hand, culture is a source of identity, and of resistance against oppression. But on the other hand it can also be an excuse for oppression and for imperialism. Indeed, many an empire has been built on the basis of a supposed cultural superiority, with the excuse that it is necessary for us, the conquerors, to share our superior culture with them, the conquered. Thus, Alexander justified his conquests with the dream of spreading Greek culture throughout the world. And the Romans justified theirs with the desire to bring their "barbarian" neighbors into civilization. And the Spanish justified theirs with the obligation to share their faith with the poor, benighted people of this hemisphere. And the Anglo-American empire of the past two centuries was built, on the British side, on the premise of "the white man's burden" and, on the American side, on the doctrine of a "manifest destiny."

In short, the first thing to be said about culture —about all cultures— is that they bear in themselves the sign of sin. But at the same time this has to be said in a manner that does not belittle the value of culture, nor excuses Christians who ride rough-shod over them.

Therefore, at this point it is important to emphasize that culture is part of God's purpose for the human creature. In the Genesis story, that creature is placed on the land in order to till it —that is, to cultivate it, to create culture. God did not intend for the garden to remain as it was, but gave it to the human creature to till, that is, to change, to make it more productive and more hospitable. Significantly, this is affirmed by both accounts of creation in Genesis. In the first, God tells the first humans, "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gn 1.28). In the second, we are told that "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it" (Gn. 2.15).

Unfortunately, there are many Christians today who are so bewildered by cultural developments that they tend to think that all culture is a departure from the primitive state God willed. To this day, there are Christians who refuse to use electricity because even though presumably God created it, God did not create the delivery system that humanity has developed, nor the various uses to which we put it. In a less extreme fashion, there are many —at various times most of us— who bemoan the changes brought by the more recent technological developments, by things such as texting, and tweeting, and e-mail, and e-marts, and e-mags. (Perhaps we are afraid that we will end up with an e-religion . . .) But in the Bible the human creature is intended to till the land, to tend to the garden, which certainly means to make it more productive and more hospitable. What is more, we must not forget that the biblical story, which begins in a garden, ends in a city. That the garden evolve into a city is part of God-s purpose, no matter how much we distort it by turning our cities into centers of violence.

Furthermore, in the biblical narrative God is the origin, not only of culture in general, but also of the diversity of cultures. This is the point of the story of the tower of Babel, which deserves another look. The commonly held notion is that the variety of tongues is a divine curse, and that this curse is lifted in Pentecost. Thus we frequently hear sermons contrasting Babel and Pentecost. There is indeed a contrast between the two; but this contrast is not as simple as we usually think.

Let us look first at the story of Babel. In passing, one may note that the beginning of the story is another of those cases in which a change in environment leads to a change in culture. The story begins by telling us that "as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there" (Gn 11.2). Shinar is an alluvial plain, and therefore the stone that was common further west was not available. And so they develop new building materials: "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar" (Gn 11.3). In other words, their new environment leads them to develop new building materials —in this case, bricks. Now, bricks have a great advantage over stone, particularly when the tools and the technique are lacking to make stone absolutely level: bricks can be molded into perfect rectangles, and stacked one over the others, so that now it is possible to erect taller buildings. Now there seem to be limitless possibilities, and so they say, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens" (Gn 11.4).

Lest we deceive ourselves into thinking that this is a silly dream the likes of which will never tempt us, let us begin by acknowledging that quite repeatedly, as cultures develop, they fall into the same trap of undue pride. I well remember the day the Russians put the first sputnik into orbit. The morning news said, “the conquest of space has begun”; “this is a new era for humankind.” Then I went to my ethics class with H. Richard Niebuhr. Without previous comment, Niebuhr said: “There once was a ship tossed by waves in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, loaded with potatoes. One day, a worm in one of the potatoes managed to eat its way out of the skin, and gaze at the next potato. He immediately declared, ‘we have conquered the universe’!”

I also remember when the first computers were put in the general market. A new future was opening up. We would now become “a paperless society.” As I now look back, I remember that at that time I used to buy paper by the ream. Now, I buy it by the case!

And yet, we still believe that with the new technology we can have our cake and eat it; that we can exploit the environment to the utmost, and still have it; that if there is now a shortage of fuel, we will soon find another.

So, the dream of the people at Babel is not so unusual. “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens.”

The story itself we have known since childhood. According to the text, the people feared being scattered, and wished to make a name for themselves. Perhaps one can connect the not wishing to be scattered with the building of a city, which would gather all of them together. And the making of a name for themselves with the building of this huge tower that would reach heaven itself. God's response is also well known: "Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

So, God confuses their languages, they can no longer communicate among themselves, and they are scattered. Interestingly, the people who began their enterprise so as not to be scattered are now scattered; and presumably the people who began trying to make a name for themselves now have many names, for they now speak different languages.

Traditionally, this has been understood as proof that God punishes human pride, and that the result of that punishment is the multiplicity of languages, which is a curse with which humankind must now live.

There is no doubt that this is one side of the coin; but there is another side. The confusion of languages, rather than a curse, may be seen as a liberating action on God's part. Humans had been enslaved by their inordinate pride. Instead of using their God-given power and new technology for the good of the land and of humankind, instead of creating culture as they were intended to do, they decide to employ that power to reach up to heaven —that is, to usurp

God's sovereign power. By confusing their languages, God destroys their dreams of grandeur, the great city is abandoned, and with it pride comes tumbling down. The confusion of languages, while forcing humans to abandon their project of building the great tower, turns them back to their legitimate goal, to till the garden, to rule over creation, not as sovereign lords, but in acceptance and imitation of the loving rule of God.

In a way, to this day the diversity of human cultures has the same function. This is why dominant cultures find it so difficult to accept the value of other cultures. They too would like to believe that they can reach up to heaven, that they can usurp the power of God, to become powers controlling everything, to become a great tower reaching into heaven.

In such a setting, those other cultures that come into contact with dominant cultures, both from outside their geographical domain and from within, may be seen as gifts, not only to those who belong to those other cultures, but also to the dominant cultures themselves, which are thus liberated, even against their own wishes, from the ambition to build towers that reach up to heaven. These other cultures provide dominant cultures with the opportunity to be freed from their aesthetic and intellectual myopia —or, to put it in more common language, to be freed from their imperialistic ambitions.

If it is true that the confusion of tongues prevented the people of Babel from going on with their idolatrous dreams of grandeur, it is also true that the present-day mixture and confusion of

cultures, no matter how much they might perplex us, and no matter how much we may dislike them, at a minimum serve to remind every culture, including ours, that at best it is partial and finite; that it is not the only one in the entire planet; that its way to interpret the universe and its way of doing things are not the only feasible ones. In short, the diversity of cultures serves to rein in the imperialistic tendencies of every culture.

(And at this point it is important to point out that every culture, no matter how oppressed or how marginalized, has an inherent imperialistic dimension. After all, a culture is a way to view the world and to respond to it. Almost by definition such world-views are all-encompassing, and therefore claim universal validity.)

When it comes to the church and its mission, we must begin by noting that the diversity of cultures was always an important factor in all missiological theory and practice. There is no doubt that this diversity raises questions to which there is no easy answer. To this I shall return later on. For the time being, however, it is important to underscore that, no matter how great the difficulties posed by such diversity, the opposite situation, in which there would be only one culture, would create even greater difficulties —in particular, the crucial problem of a self-idolizing pride similar to those of the early builders of the tower of Babel.

We may now return to the story of Pentecost in the book of Acts —a story that, as I have already said, is often interpreted as the undoing of the effects of Babel. But in truth what that

story of Pentecost shows is that not only culture in an abstract or in a general sense, but also the diversity of concrete cultures, are part of God's design.

It is true that since early patristic times the contrast between Babel and Pentecost became fairly commonplace in Christian theology. Indeed, there are good reasons for such contrast. The story of Babel appears in the midst of a long list of nations; and the story of Pentecost begins with a similar list. At Babel, humankind attempts to reach the heavens; at Pentecost, God descends upon humankind. Babel was the epitome of human pride, trying to lay hold of the divine; at Pentecost God takes possession of humans. In general, the point of most of these comparisons is to show that, while at Babel unity disappeared and confusion reigned, at Pentecost confusion disappears and unity reigns among people of different cultures.

But when we consider the matter in some detail we see that, while the contrasts are real, they are not absolute. In Acts we read that "the crowd gathered and was bewildered." The Greek word that the NRSV translates as "bewildered" is the same word that the Septuagint employs in its translation into Greek of what our NRSV says in Genesis 11.7: "let us go down, and *confuse* their language." And it is also the word that appears at the end of the story, where we are told that, as a result of the events of Pentecost, "all were bewildered and perplexed." Confusion and perplexity do not disappear as a result of Pentecost, but on the contrary, they appear to increase.

Pentecost is not simply the cancellation of Babel. According to Genesis, before the story of Babel there was only one language, and then there were many. But according to Acts, even after Pentecost there continues to exist a great variety of tongues. At Babel, God's intervention leads to confusion. At Pentecost, God's intervention likewise causes confusion. Actually, in both stories the narrative moves from unity to diversity. At the beginning of the story of Babel, the unity of language allows the people to undertake a common project; at the end of the story, they no longer understand one another, and the common project is abandoned. At the beginning of the Pentecost narrative "they were all together in one place," apparently speaking only one language. At the end of the story, the same people are speaking a multitude of languages, and part of the result is perplexity, confusion, and even division among those present, since some interpret what they see as a great miracle, and others as a drunken party.

The story of Pentecost is so well known that very often we miss some of what it says. At the very beginning of the story we see that the power of the Holy Spirit is very different from the manner in which society at large —and quite often also the church— understands power, in terms of hierarchical structures. All we need to do is to read the beginning of Peter's speech to realize that the power of the Holy Spirit does not manifest itself in the creation of a power structure, as if the Spirit came to the people through the hierarchy of the church, but exactly the opposite. What Peter says is that what is taking place is the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy in which God says: "I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh, and *your sons and your daughters* shall prophesy, and your *young men* shall see visions, and your *old men* shall dream dreams. Even

upon my *slaves, both men and women*, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

It is interesting to note that this is not the common picture we have of Pentecost. Indeed, it suffices to go to any museum and look at the ways in which Pentecost is depicted. In most cases, we will see twelve men sitting in a circle, each with a tongue of fire on his head. In some cases, the Virgin Mary is added to the group, usually at its center, and she too has a tongue of fire.

But this is not the image of Pentecost that the text conveys. Had it been only the twelve that received the Spirit, it would make no sense to say that this is what the prophet announced, that God's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, and on the young and the old, and the sons and daughters, and upon slaves, both male and female. At the beginning of the story we have been told that "they were *all* together in one place" —that is, men and women, young and old, daughters and sons— and that "a tongue rested on *each* of them."

This hardly needs further commentary. What does need further commentary is an important detail that we often miss. If the purpose of the Spirit was for all to understand what was being said by the disciples, the Spirit had two choices. One was to make all the crowd understand the language of the disciples. The other was to allow the disciples to speak in such a way that the crowd would hear each in their own tongue. This might seem to make little difference to those

who read this text from the perspective of a dominant culture. But it is very important for those who read from the perspective of a marginalized culture. The first option, to allow all to understand the language of the disciples, would have made that language and the culture connected with it the official and only language and of the nascent community. It would also have meant that the culture of the apostles was central to the faith in such a way that the more one adapted to the culture of the disciples the more one would be a true follower of the gospel. If, on the other hand, each heard the gospel in his or her own tongue, this would mean that the tongue and the culture of the original disciples were not to be required nor dominant in that nascent community.

But there is more to it. Implied in all of this is a question of power and authority. Had the Spirit chosen to have all understand the language of the first disciples, this would also have meant that those first disciples —and those who spoke like them and were part of their culture— would always hold power and authority over the rest of the community. If, on the other hand, the Spirit chose to make each understand in his or her own language, this very act of the Spirit would begin to subvert the power and authority of the first disciples.

Can we imagine what would now happen if Peter or any other of the first disciples were to visit a newly formed congregation of believers who spoke in their own tongue rather than in the Aramean of the early disciples? They would hardly know what is going on, and they would have difficulties trying to control it. Those of us who belong to minority cultures in this society know

something of what that means. Those in the church of the dominant culture wish to have us speak English, so that they may know what is going on; but quite often we prefer to speak in our own tongue, partly because our own identity is closely connected to it, but partly also because this tends to give us a measure of freedom from the supervision of others. I can also venture to guess that some of the difficulties Peter had in Antioch had to do with his unease in the midst of a community of believers that now included, not only Hellenistic Jews, but also Gentiles converted to the gospel.

This means that the power of the Holy Spirit is an odd sort of power. All we have to do is turn on the television early any Sunday morning to find dozens of people who claim that they have the power of the Spirit, and that this gives them authority over the rest of believers. There are even so-called “apostolic networks” whose modern-day superapostles claim that title as a source of authority over common Christians. But in the story of Pentecost the power of the Spirit is made manifest, not in power accumulated, but in power shared. The first disciples receive the Spirit, and the first thing they do is preach in other people’s tongues, thus making it possible for them too to claim the power of the Spirit.

Part of the result of Pentecost is that the mother tongue of the early disciples now becomes just one more of the many tongues in which the gospel is proclaimed and lived out. And the culture of those early disciples becomes simply one more of the many cultures in which the gospel will take flesh.

Lamin Sanneh, who teaches missiology at Yale Divinity School, has written a very interesting book on this subject, under the title of *Translating the Gospel*. Sanneh himself grew up as a Muslim, and later in the war converted to Christianity. Thus, he knows Islam from the inside, and is uniquely qualified to compare it with Christianity. One of his main theses in that book is that by its very nature Christianity is translatable in a manner in which Islam is not. A strictly orthodox Muslim is convinced that the true Quran is only the original Arabic text. Everything else, while probably helpful, is a mere *translation* of the Quran, and not the Quran itself. In contrast, for an equally orthodox Christian a translation of the Bible is still the Bible. Certainly, there is value in learning the original languages of Scripture, for they help us evaluate and correct whatever translation we are working with. But still, when I hold a copy of the NRSV or of the New English Bible I do not say that I am holding a translation, but rather that I am holding the Bible. And the experience of countless believers through the ages who have read the Bible translated to their own tongue is that God does indeed speak to them in translation.

According to Sanneh, these different attitudes toward translations are reflected in the contrasting ways in which Islam and Christianity relate to cultures different from those of their original setting. With some notable exceptions, the expansion of Islam has generally been coextensive with the expansion of Arabic language and culture. Even in those places where the language of the people is not Arabic, such as Indonesia and Pakistan, Arabic is still considered normative in all religious matters. In contrast, Christianity has become incarnate in a multitude of cultures. Certainly, this has not been easy. Quite often even those missionaries who in theory

believed in the need for the gospel to become incarnate in a new culture, and who therefore sought a policy of acculturation, have been surprised and even resistant when Christianity begins taking unexpected forms. The process of genuine inculturation is long and is often the work of succeeding generations. But even so, in the end the gospel has become incarnate in a multitude of cultures, often in ways that the early missionaries, and even the first converts, would never have imagined. The reason for this, says Sanneh, is that in the final analysis the gospel is translatable by its very nature.

It is true that throughout history we Christians have not always been faithful to this translatability of the gospel, often falling prey to the temptation of imagining that the incarnation of the gospel in a particular culture —naturally, ours— is the best and most pure form that the gospel may take. This has often led to conflicts and divisions that could have been avoided. Thus, during the patristic era believers in the Western part of the Roman Empire began interpreting and living their faith within the context of Latin culture —and this was good. At the same time, believers in the Eastern part of the Empire did likewise within the context of their own Hellenistic culture —and this too was good. The problem came as both Greeks and Latins began to think that their own interpretation of Christianity, their own theology, and their own way of worship were the only correct ones —or were at least better that the other's. It took a long time, but friction increased through the centuries, to the point that eventually a schism arose which continues to this day.

In a similar fashion, one may note that at the time of the Reformation those churches that most successfully separated from Roman Catholicism were mostly at the periphery or even beyond the borders of the ancient Roman Empire. By and large, most people who spoke Romance languages remained Roman Catholic, while the greatest successes of Protestantism were among the descendants of the ancient Germanic tribes —people who spoke languages such as German, English, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. Theologically I consider myself very much a descendant of that Germanic form of Christianity, and therefore during most of my youth I was convinced that the purest form of Christianity was that which came to us in a Germanic garb —and I frequently confused that garb with Christianity itself. There was ample reason to do so, for during the years of my youth the centers of Christian vitality and mission were, for Protestants, the North Atlantic; and, for Catholics, Romance-speaking Europe.

But today things have changed drastically. Today the centers of vitality and mission are no longer in the North Atlantic nor in Western Europe. Today those centers have shifted south and east, so that there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States. Today, there are more missionaries from Puerto Rico in New York than all the missionaries that are sent to the entire world by all the various boards of missions in New York. Today, there is as much theological activity creativity in Lima, in Johannesburg and in Seoul as there is in Heidelberg or in New Haven. If the translation of the gospel from one language to another, and its transmission from one culture to another, are a gauge by which to measure the success of Christian mission, there is no doubt that the missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth

century succeeded. In most cases, they succeeded far beyond their expectations, and in ways that were still living would probably leave them as perplexed as those early witnesses at Pentecost.

But if we then return to the book of Acts and the story of Pentecost, we can claim that the reason for such success is that the first and foremost translator of the Gospel, and the one leading the incarnation of the gospel in a variety of cultures, is none other that the Holy Spirit!

The implications of all this for the mission of the church today should be obvious. The greatest temptation of the churches today —particularly the more traditional churches— is to imagine that what is needed is more leaders like those of past generations —leaders with similar experiences, formed in a similar culture, and perhaps even of the same ethnic background. Quite often what is expected of the Holy Spirit is not the guidance into new contexts, but rather the preservation of the old forms. Normally, at least in my own denomination, such attitudes are not openly acknowledged, and are frequently hidden even from those who hold them. But still they are justified in terms of strict adherence to the laws, books of order, books of government, and traditions in theology and in worship. Most of these laws and books of order were developed by people of the same culturally dominant group. Worship and theology have been developed —as they should have been— in the womb of the culture of that group. Even the Bible, for generations has been read within the context of that culture and the issues debated in it. In view of all this, consciously or not, churches tend to look for leaders who

replicate the leaders who already exist, and who, either by birth or by adaptation, conform to a particular church's culture. And, when all else fails, and new and different leaders begin to emerge, the existing order and rules of the church are used to hold them back.

Such an appeal to order as a means —perhaps unconscious— to retain power appears in the Christian community from its very beginning. We can see such a case as early as the very first chapter of Acts. Jesus had instructed the disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit. But Peter, as impulsive as ever, feels the need to begin mending things even before the promised Spirit comes. So, after a fairly long review of what has happened to Judas, and referring to the vacancy left by his death and betrayal, Peter says: "So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us —one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." Apparently Peter is a structural conservative: The Lord made us twelve, and twelve we must be. And he proposes criteria to determine who is eligible for the vacant position: it must be someone who was part of the group from the very beginning —the time of John the Baptist— and remained with the group until the day of the ascension. The problem is that, as I read the Gospel, I find that of the eleven only four were with the group from the very beginning. And of those four, only John remained firm "beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us." Apparently Peter himself did not notice the contradiction. He was so concerned that the person chosen could really be part of the group, that he set up requirements that most in the group did not meet.

This may seem strange to people in a dominant culture who, like Peter, set up rules for what they believe to be the good of the church. But quite often those of minority cultures experience these rules as ways to exclude them, or at least to set up hoops that others have not gone through.

I well remember my shock when I heard a leading Presbyterian theologian declare that the Presbyterian system of government is so refined and so well balanced that one must be at least a second generation Presbyterian in order to understand and appreciate it. While not often expressed as bluntly, similar attitudes still persist in most mainline denominations (or, should I say “old line”?).

Why do such attitudes persist? Most people who hold to them, consciously or unconsciously, are afraid that the growing mixture of cultures, languages, places of origin, etc. will result in the fragmentation of the church. There is no doubt that such multiplicity creates problems. We already find it difficult to understand one another even while speaking a single language and within the context of a single culture. What will happen if there are a multitude of languages? How can we avoid becoming a new Babel? Or, in more traditional theological terms, how can a church incarnate in many cultures, a church in which cultures mingle and even clash, a church in which people see the same things in a variety of ways, be truly catholic?

This is the heart of the issue, the catholicity of the church and how to preserve it while at the same time being incarnate in a multitude of cultures —cultures that do not always see eye-to-eye?

That is the issue on which we shall focus our attention in our next session together.