



DICASTERIUM DE CULTU DIVINO
ET DISCIPLINA SACRAMENTORUM

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MESSAGE OF THE DICASTERY
FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS
on the occasion of the
SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF AFRICAN LITURGISTS
2–9 AUGUST 2026

Your Excellencies,
Dear Liturgists of the Churches in Africa,
Dear Friends,

I am pleased that you have decided to continue your meetings in the form of the International Congress of African Liturgists, which began more than two years ago in Senegal. Your present reflection on liturgical inculturation will be a valuable service to the Church, for it touches the very heart of Christian life: the encounter with God in the mystery celebrated within the context of the rich diversity of African cultures.

Your commitment is particularly important today, at a time when the Church is called to understand ever more deeply how the Gospel can become incarnate within the cultures of peoples without losing anything of its truth or saving power. Liturgical inculturation is not a secondary or merely aesthetic question, for it concerns the concrete manner in which the mystery of Christ reaches men and women of every people, language and culture.

1. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14)

Liturgical inculturation finds its foundation precisely in the mystery of the Incarnation. Just as the eternal Word of the Father assumed a concrete historical, cultural and human condition, so too the Liturgy is called to express the mystery of Christ through languages, symbols and forms that are intelligible and meaningful for every people.

The Son of God did not reveal Himself in an abstract manner; rather, He assumed a language, gestures, symbols, a culture and a concrete human sensitivity (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 22). For this reason, the Liturgy, which sacramentally prolongs Christ’s work throughout history, cannot remain foreign to the life and cultures of peoples. It makes use of material and human realities in order to mediate the divine presence day by day: natural elements such as water, oil, wine and bread are united to gestures—such as the laying on of hands and the sign of the cross—and to words inspired by Scripture or spoken by Jesus Himself. Thus, through “I baptize you”, “Do this in memory of me”, or “I absolve you”, we participate in Christ’s saving work. Indeed, in the Liturgy «the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses» (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7).

2. “And we beheld His glory” (Jn 1:14)

In the prologue of his Gospel, Saint John the Apostle bears witness with gratitude and wonder to how the great mystery of the Incarnation enabled him and his contemporaries to see with their own eyes the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself would later say: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Lk 10:23–24).

To us, however, who come after these events, another blessing is given: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn 20:29). We do not see God with our own eyes, nor do we hear His word directly from His lips; yet that privileged moment in salvation history is made present to us *per ritus et preces* (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48).

These rites and prayers arise from the concrete experience of the disciples who followed the Lord, witnessed His actions, heard His words and shared in His Passover. In this way the Church learned to keep His memory alive, continuing to follow in His footsteps down to our own day.

The Liturgy preserves what the disciples and the first ecclesial community saw, heard and received from the Lord (cf. 1 Jn 1:1–3). Every authentic inculturation must begin from this fundamental experience: it is not a matter of creating a new liturgy, but of allowing the mystery received from the Apostles truly to find expression in the life of peoples.

In light of these reflections, it becomes clear that inculturation is a profound transformation that occurs almost “by osmosis” when the mystery celebrated encounters a culture hitherto unfamiliar with it. Authentic inculturation is therefore not a simple external addition of traditional, cultural elements to the liturgy, nor does it consist in introducing new ceremonial elements or merely translating liturgical texts into a vernacular language. It is something much deeper: the encounter between God, sacramentally present, and the history, culture and very “soul” of a people.

3. *O admirabile commercium!*¹

The mysterious exchange inaugurated in the Incarnation continues to bear fruit in the life of the Church. Just as the eternal Word of the Father assumed a human body—and therefore a concrete culture—without losing His divine identity, so too the liturgy enters into the cultures of peoples without losing its ecclesial and sacramental identity. Certain considerations, however, must be kept in mind.

As Pope Leo XIV has recalled: «it is necessary to clarify that inculturation does not equate to a sacralization of cultures or their adoption as a decisive interpretative framework for the Gospel message, nor can it be reduced to a relativistic accommodation or a superficial adaptation of the Christian message, since no culture, however valuable it may be, can simply be identified with Revelation or become the ultimate criterion of faith. To legitimize everything that is culturally given or to justify practices, worldviews or structures that

¹ *Solemnitatis Sanctae Dei Genitrix Mariae, Ant. 1, Ad I Vespras, Ad II Vespras.*

contradict the Gospel and the dignity of the person would be to ignore that every culture — like every human reality — must be enlightened and transformed by the grace that flows from the Paschal mystery of Christ. Inculturation is, rather, a demanding and purifying process, through which the Gospel, while remaining intact in its truth, recognises, discerns and assumes the *semina Verbi* present in cultures, and at the same time purifies and elevates their authentic values, freeing them from that which obscures or disfigures them. These *seeds of the Word*, as traces of the Spirit's prior action, find in Jesus Christ their criterion of authenticity and their fulfilment.» (*Message of Pope Leo XIV to the Participants in the "Pastoral-Theological Congress" on the Event of Guadalupe, 5 February 2026*).

4. For Liturgical Inculturation

In light of theological reflection and the experience acquired by the universal Church in the field of evangelization, it is possible to identify certain essential criteria that must guide the process of liturgical inculturation.

a) The Purpose of Inculturation

The Instruction *Varietates legitimate* no. 35 states that, first of all, the goal of inculturation must be clearly understood «which is that laid down by the Second Vatican Council as the basis of the general restoration of the liturgy: "Both texts and rites should be so drawn up that they express more clearly the holy things they signify and so that the Christian people, as far as possible, may be able to understand them with ease and to take part in the rites fully, actively and as befits a community." Rites also need "to be adapted to the capacity of the faithful and that there should not be a need for numerous explanations for them to be understood." However, the nature of the liturgy always has to be borne in mind, as does the biblical and traditional character of its structure and the particular way in which it is expressed».

The goal of inculturation, therefore, is neither originality nor the desire to make the liturgy simply more attractive. Its purpose is that the mystery celebrated may be expressed more clearly and that the Christian people may participate fully, actively and communally in the sacred mysteries.

b) Fidelity to the Mystery Celebrated

The mystery of Christ must remain the centre and criterion of every adaptation. The cultural forms adopted in celebrations must neither replace nor obscure the Mystery. Rather, they should enable an encounter with God without altering His definitive Revelation, which has reached its fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ.

For this reason, *Varietates legitimae* states: «The process of inculturation should maintain the substantial unity of the Roman rite. This unity is currently expressed in the typical editions of liturgical books, published by authority of the supreme pontiffs and in the liturgical books approved by the episcopal conferences for their areas and confirmed by the Apostolic See. The work of inculturation does not foresee the creation of new families of rites; inculturation

responds to the needs of a particular culture and leads to adaptations which still remain part of the Roman rite» (*Varietates legitimæ*, 36).

This is especially important to recall today, when there is sometimes a risk of confusing inculturation with arbitrary experimentation or with an imaginative — sometimes wild — creativity without rules (cf. *Desiderio desideravi*, 48). The Liturgy does not belong to an individual celebrant, to a particular group, or to an isolated cultural sensibility. Liturgical actions are not private actions but celebrations of the Church itself which is the sacrament of unity, that is, a holy people gathered and ordered under the bishops in the unity with the Pope. Liturgical actions therefore belong to the whole body of the Church and manifest and affect it (cf. Can. 837 §1 CIC).

c) The Ecclesial Dimension

Inculturation is not an isolated individual or local initiative, but an act of love that the Church undertakes for the sake of the Gospel and of cultures, in obedience to the command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19).

Inculturation is realized in communion with the Church, in dialogue with pastors, with the whole ecclesial tradition, with believers and also with experts in the culture. «Adaptations of the Roman rite, even in the field of inculturation, depend in their entirety on the authority of the Church. This authority belongs to the Apostolic See, which exercises this through the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments; it also belongs, within the limits fixed by law, to episcopal conferences and to the diocesan bishop. “No other person, not even if he is a priest, may on his own initiative add, remove or change anything in the liturgy.” Inculturation is not left to the personal initiative of celebrants or to the collective initiative of an assembly» (*Varietates legitimæ*, 37).

During his recent Apostolic Journey to Africa, Pope Leo XIV also reminded the faithful: «we must always be vigilant regarding those forms of traditional religiosity that certainly belong to the roots of your culture, but at the same time risk confusing and mixing magical and superstitious elements that do not aid your spiritual journey. Remain faithful to what the Church teaches, trust your pastors, and keep your gaze fixed on Jesus, who reveals himself in the word and in the Eucharist» (*Homily of His Holiness, Kilamba/Angola*, 19 April 2026).

True inculturation is born within the Church through an act of multidimensional discernment.

d) Theological Reflection and Ongoing Formation

Above all inculturation requires serious and profound theological reflection. «In an analysis of a liturgical action with a view to its inculturation, it is necessary to consider the traditional value of the elements of the action and in particular their biblical or patristic origin, because it is not sufficient to distinguish between what can be changed and what is unchangeable» (*Varietates legitimæ*, 38).

Liturgical gestures possess a profound theological significance that cannot be ignored. Before integrating a new element, it is necessary to understand fully the value of the ritual elements already present in the Roman Rite, bearing in mind that not every cultural element is compatible with the Christian faith, with the nature of the Mystery celebrated, or with pre-existing ritual structures.

It must also be remembered that liturgical adaptation is not merely the fruit of intellectual study. It is an exercise in spiritual and ecclesial discernment that necessarily requires ongoing formation both for those entrusted with implementing inculturation and for those called to assimilate these new elements into the worship offered to God. Pope Francis, citing Romano Guardini, stated clearly that «without liturgical formation “then ritual and textual reforms won’t help much”» (*Desiderio desideravi*, 34).

Inculturation lacking adequate theological reflection and liturgical formation risks being reduced to a series of performative modifications that merely conform to contemporary social trends, whereas it should become a salvific force capable of inspiring and transforming society.

5. Africa: A Privileged terrain

The local Churches in Africa today represent one of the most fruitful contexts for the development of liturgical inculturation. The symbolic richness of African cultures, the centrality of the body, the value of community, and the sense of the sacred and of celebration constitute a privileged terrain for a living and participatory liturgy.

In many African communities, the liturgical celebration is not perceived as a merely formal act, but as a total event involving the whole person: body, emotions, relationships, memories and hopes. Song, dance, rhythm, silence and ritual gestures are natural languages through which the Christian mystery finds authentic expression. This sensitivity is an extraordinary gift for the whole Church, reminding us that bodily participation is not a marginal element: the human person worships God with his entire being.

Experiences in various African countries demonstrate that inculturation, when properly guided, not only makes the liturgy more accessible but also contributes to a deeper evangelization. It enables the faithful to recognize that the Gospel is not foreign to their identity but its fulfilment.

Processes of inculturation require time, study, prayer, experimentation and evaluation. They cannot be improvised or imposed. Communities at prayer must be accompanied with prudence and pastoral wisdom in their spiritual growth, ecclesial development and increasing awareness of the importance of the mystery being celebrated.

Saint Augustine, in his Christmas sermon on the “admirable exchange,” also evokes the mystery of the Transfiguration: «in order to present human beings both with one who could be seen by human beings and with one whom human beings might properly follow, God became a human being. And then while he was already living among men, and standing together with the three apostles whom he had led apart into a secret place, he suddenly shone

out before them, resplendent in the divine style of glory, which the apostles who were present could scarcely gaze upon, for the weakness of their human senses» (*Sermon 371, 2*).

Authentic inculturation follows this same dynamic: it enters humbly into the life of a people and, over time, allows the glory of Christ to shine forth ever more clearly.

Your work and reflection during these coming days are of great importance. I encourage you to continue studying the Instruction *Varietates legitimæ* with patience and in-depth, for it remains a fundamental text for understanding the authentic meaning of liturgical inculturation. I also invite you to study the great historical precedents of inculturation in the life of the Church: the passage of Christianity into the Greek world and later into the Latin world; its encounter with the cultures of the Americas; and the missionary work of Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili. They sought to understand deeply the cultures they encountered without betraying the Gospel or impoverishing the faith of the Church. Their example and work can illuminate your own path of inculturation.

I pray that your work may increasingly help the Churches of Africa to celebrate the mystery of Christ in fidelity to the Church's tradition and in the authentic richness of the cultures of your peoples. May the liturgy truly become the place where the Word continues to dwell among men and where peoples may still behold His glory.

Grateful for this initiative, we entrust all of you, participants in the Second Congress of African Liturgists in Kurasini, Tanzania, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Kawekamo.

From the Vatican, 29 June 2026
Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul

Arthur Cardinal Roche
Prefect