

Inculturation

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Inculturation is a term used in [Christianity](#), especially in the [Roman Catholic Church](#), referring to the adaptation of the way Church teachings are presented to non-Christian cultures, and to the influence of those cultures to the evolution of these teachings.

Background

The coexistence of Christianity and other cultures dates back to the apostolic age. Jesus instructed his disciples to spread his teachings to the ends of the earth (Mk28,28, Mk16,15) “before his ascension but did not tell them how.”^[1] Saint Paul's speech to the Greeks at the Aeropagus of [Athens](#) (Acts 17:22-33) could be considered as the first inculturation attempt. The speech was not well received, according to verse 32: "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked".^[2] In or around the year 50, the apostles convened the first Church council, the [Council of Jerusalem](#), to decide whether to include Gentiles and inculturate Gentile culture.^{[3][4]} At the [Council of Jerusalem](#) in 50, it was confirmed that [Gentiles](#) and [Jews](#) could be accepted as Christians.

Cultural conflicts between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians continued until Christianity incorporated the [Greco-Roman](#) culture.^[5] Similar inculturation occurred when the [Roman Empire](#) ceased and the Germanic and Medieval cultures became dominant, a process taking centuries.^[6] Early practitioners of inculturation in the history of missions include [St. Patrick](#) in Ireland and [Sts. Cyril and Methodius](#) for the [Slavic peoples](#) of Eastern Europe. After the schism of 1054, the [Roman Catholic Church](#) was largely restricted to the Western parts of Europe. Attempts failed to broaden the sphere of influence to the cultures of the [Middle East](#) with the [crusades](#) and the [Latin Empire in Constantinople](#) (1204-1261). The [Protestant Reformation](#) generated a division in the Western Church. However, at the same time, [Spanish](#) and [Portuguese](#) discoveries of the Americas, Asia and Africa broadened contact with other cultures and civilizations.^[7]

Inculturation after the discoveries

After the discoveries of new territories and the [Council of Trent](#) (1545-1563) the movement became more systematic, when the Roman Church had to ponder how and to evaluate elements of ancient non-Christian cultures. Notable figures were, among others, [José de Anchieta](#) for the indigenous people of Brazil, [Roberto de Nobili](#) in Southern India, [Alexandre de Rhodes](#) in [Vietnam](#).

China



Matteo Ricci (left) and [Xu Guangqi](#) (right) in the Chinese edition of [Euclid's Elements](#), published in 1607.

Main article: [Chinese Rites controversy](#)

The [Jesuits](#) [Matteo Ricci](#), [Adam Schall von Bell](#) and others had successfully introduced Christianity to China. Ricci and Schall were appointed by the [Chinese Emperor](#) in [Peking](#) to be court [mathematicians](#) court [astronomer](#) and even [Mandarin](#). The first Catholic Church was built in Peking in 1650.^[8] The emperor granted freedom of religion to Catholics. Ricci had adapted the Catholic faith to Chinese thinking, permitting among others the cultic veneration of ancestors, which he described as a mere cultural practice. The Holy See disagreed, deeming the veneration an act of worship and hence [idolatry](#), and forbade any adaptation in the so-called [Chinese Rites controversy](#) in 1692 and 1742. The Chinese emperor felt duped and refused to permit any alteration of the existing Christian practices. The Church experienced missionary setbacks in 1721 when the [Kangxi Emperor](#) outlawed Christian missions.^[9] According to Franzen, "The Vatican policy was the death of the missions in China."^[10]

Papal teachings

Leo XIII

Pope Leo XIII fostered inter-cultural diversity, leading to the reintegration of the [Armenian Church](#) into the Catholic Church in 1879. He opposed efforts to Latinize the [Eastern Rite Churches](#), stating that they constitute a most valuable ancient tradition and symbol of the divine unity of the Catholic Church. His 1894 encyclical *Praeclara Gratulationis* praised the cultural and liturgical diversity of expressions of faith within the Church. In *Orientalum Dignitatis* he repeated the need to preserve and cultivate diversity and declared different cultures to be a treasure.^[11] He opposed the latinization policies of his own Vatican and decreed a number of measures which preserved the integrity and distinctiveness of other cultural expressions.^[11]

Benedict XV and Pius XI

While [Pope Pius IX](#) and [Pope Pius X](#) tended to be slightly more Latin oriented, [Benedict XV](#) was especially concerned with the development of missionary activities, which had suffered so much during [World War I](#). Inculturation meant to him first of all the development of domestic clergy. On November 20, 1919, he appealed to the Catholics of the world, to support missions and especially the development of local clergy, favouring a de-Europeanization of the Catholic missions. ^[12] [Pope Pius XI](#) followed suit, by promoting local clergy, the local cultures are better recognized. To this end he held a mission congress in Rome in 1922 and personally consecrated each year bishops from Asia, Africa and Latin America. ^[13] At his death 240 dioceses and administrations were in the hands of domestic bishops.

Pius XII

In 1939 [Pope Pius XII](#), within weeks of his coronation, radically [reverted the 250 year old Vatican policy](#) and permitted the veneration of dead family members in [China](#). ^[10] The December 8, 1939 issuance from the [Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith](#) issued at the request of Pius XII stated that Chinese customs were no longer considered superstitious but rather an honourable way of esteeming one's relatives, and therefore permitted by Catholics. ^[14] The Church began to flourish again with twenty new arch-dioceses, seventy-nine dioceses and thirty-eight apostolic prefects, but only until 1949, when the Communist revolution took over the country. ^[15]

The introduction of the Gospel means inculturation and not the destruction of local cultures. Pius emphasized this because not all seemed to understand this point. He wrote in [Summi Pontificatus](#) that a deeper appreciation into the various civilizations and their good qualities are necessary to the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. ^[16] And in his 1944 speech to the directors of the Pontifical Missionary Society, he said:

- The herald of the Gospel and messenger of Christ is an apostle. His office does not demand that he transplant European civilization and culture, and no other, to foreign soil, there to take root and propagate itself. His task in dealing with these peoples, who sometimes boast of a very old and highly developed culture of their own, is to teach and form them so that they are ready to accept willingly and in a practical manner the principles of Christian life and morality; principles, I might add, that fit into any culture, provided it be good and sound, and which give that culture greater force in safeguarding human dignity and in gaining human happiness. ^[17]

Inculturation was addressed in his encyclicals. [Evangelii Praecones](#) and [Fidei Donum](#), issued on June 2, 1951 and April 21, 1957, respectively, increased the local decision-making of Catholic missions, many of which became independent dioceses. Pius XII demanded recognition of local cultures as fully equal to European culture. ^{[18][19]} Continuing the line of his predecessors, Pius XII supported the establishment of local administration in Church affairs: in 1950, the hierarchy of Western Africa became independent; in 1951, Southern Africa; and in 1953, British Eastern Africa. Finland, Burma and French Africa became independent dioceses in 1955.

John Paul II

[John Paul II](#) addressed the issue in several encyclicals and public appearances. The term was used again by the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II in 1990.

- "The incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church." [\[20\]](#)
- "The intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures." [\[21\]](#)
- "It is now acknowledged that *inculturation* is a theological term which has been defined in *Redemptoris Missio* 52 as the on-going dialogue between faith and culture." [\[22\]](#)