

Guideline 1



**Introductory Paper:**

*"Culture and Christian Faith"* - Alexander Zatirka sj.

# “Culture and Christian faith”

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## 1. Christian Faith and cultures. Historical background

The practice of taking the Good News to different cultures has taken place throughout the entire history of the Church. We need only think of Saint Paul’s missionary work in relation to the Greco-Roman communities of his time to understand that the “tradition” of the gospel in different cultural contexts has been an integral part of the Christian faith since the beginning. Even in the Old Testament we can find the roots of ongoing contextualization. Israel based her faith on the belief that Yahweh was the only true God. In the sacred scriptures the people of Israel express how the relationship with this one God was lived in many different ways throughout her history. As a matter of fact, some of these ways might appear contradictory. This is because we can only understand the unity and relevance of God in the Bible in the diversity of the humanity that contemplates and describes this one Lord. God is always one, but God is described in multiple ways. Trying to limit Yahweh to one single vision, to one way of looking, would be idolatry.

The followers of Christ have demonstrated their capacity for dialogue with different cultures since the beginning of the faith, inclusively in the midst of resistance and conflict.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel, and its expression as the Kingdom of God, made this possible by the very nature of the Church. The legacy of Christ was not a book (he never wrote one), but rather a community to whom he entrusted the mission of adapting the Good News to different circumstances. This reality facilitated a constructive dialogue between the present and the past, a dialogue taking place among all those who felt themselves called to believe in the Gospel. It is for this reason that we have, not only one gospel, but four approved different versions of the words of Jesus. The New Testament itself gives us the theological foundation for inculturation, many times surprising us with its boldness. Moreover, the new Christian religion was not the exclusive inheritance of one particular people or of one culture. The histories of all peoples are integrated into one common history of salvation, the history of God and of humanity, the irruption of God’s Kingdom (God’s explicit sovereignty in the lives of women and men, of whatever race or culture). In the epistle to Diognetus, dating around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century of the Christian era,<sup>3</sup> we learn that Christians could not be told apart from others with whom they lived, *“by their national origin, language or costumes,... they do not live apart in cities, or have a different language, or live in a way that calls their neighbor’s attention.”*

This demonstrates that the Christian faith was completely, culturally integrated into each context.

The Church quickly learned that faith expressions that were always attached to one particular culture could become irrelevant when they were no long part

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Acts 10:1-48 (Peter and Cornelius) or Galatians 2:1-14 (controversy between Peter and Paul)

<sup>3</sup> Early Christian Writings, Penguin Classics, London 1987, 144-145.

of their original context. Languages, costumes, rituals and symbols change requiring the Gospel be “planted” anew each time it crosses a cultural frontier. This is the case, not only from a simultaneous perspective (different cultures existing at the same time), but also diachronically, (that is, a culture that is transformed or changes with time). Expressions of the faith can become insignificant to new generations, even becoming obsolete. When this happens, it means that the cultural frames of reference have changed.

In many cases, the local Churches’ ability to inculturate themselves in their social surroundings meant the difference between growth and expansion, or decline and extinction. History has shown that the Church retained its vitality in those places where the Gospel was culturally rooted. This was achieved by making the Sacred Scriptures available to all, by developing local leadership and a unique style of worship, and by allowing the Christian message to be totally embodied in the new cultural context in order to create a relevant theology. The Church blossomed in the places where this was achieved, even under difficult circumstances and persecution, such as the threat and persecution by Islam in Armenia, Egypt and Ethiopia. In similar circumstances of persecution, the Church disappeared in the areas where it was not rooted in the local culture, such as in Mahgreb (North Africa) or Nubia (Sudan). In the places where the Church disappeared, it continued to be “a foreign body” in the local cultures (for example, Roman presence in Mahgreb of Bereber culture).

Examples such as these help us conclude that the Gospel, as a proclamation of the Kingdom of God, should have a dynamic relationship with the culture where it is present. This can only come about when its theology is rooted in the unique aspects of that particular culture. The Church survived in places where people lived the Christian faith as part of their unique identities, personally and collectively, as the foundation of their culture. Trimmingham, cited by Shenk, expressed it in the following manner: “*isolation (with respect to the culture of origin of the one who evangelizes) helped bring about the successful translation of the Christian faith to indigenous cultural forms. When the faith was “naturalized,” it was victorious.*”<sup>4</sup>

These successful Churches understood that evangelization means much more than merely transmitting “truths.” Sharing the Christian faith is predominantly an experience of God that must be rooted in the local experience of transcendence, of the sacred. God reveals himself by giving each culture the guidelines it needs to interpret the Revelation. The early Christians found these guidelines in their cultural traditions, fortifying their identity through this new faith, sensing that their cultural heritage was converted into a place for God’s Revelation.

In Europe, throughout the Middle Ages, Christianity developed by rooting itself in new cultures as a result of the Germanic, Slavic and central Asian migrations. Strictly speaking, we can say that this was the “Europeanization” period of the Church. At this time the oriental Churches were much more successful than their Roman sister in their efforts towards inculturation, respecting the local language and traditions of the people where they carried

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Shenk, Calvin E., “The Demise of the Church in North Africa and Nubia and its Survival in Egypt and Ethiopia: A Question of Contextualization?”, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, April 1993, 141-147.

out their mission, establishing national hierarchies, etc. In the Latin Church, we also see the blossoming of the national Churches with their unique theological and liturgical traditions. All of these “embodiments” of the Good News enriched the catholicity, or universality of the Church. The believers felt certain that they were led by the Spirit of Christ that gave them the freedom to go beyond cultural divisions, while at the same promoting the strengthening of unique cultural identities.

Since the time of Charlemagne, however, we find a strong tendency towards uniformity in Western Christianity. This was reinforced by papal reforms in the second half of the Middle Ages and reached its peak with the tridentine reform in the XVI century. The latter, in good part as a reaction to the “national” character of the Reformed churches, chose uniformity in language, theology and liturgy for the Roman Catholic Church. Since then, all of the Catholic communities had to resign themselves to this “universal” model that was in reality merely a Western European model.<sup>5</sup> These policies had grave consequences, especially in Latin America and Asia where from the very beginning conscious attempts were made to inculturate the Gospel. As soon as these efforts came into conflict with colonial interests, the disputes reached the central authorities of the Church. The processes were abruptly withheld and any further development was prohibited. Because of this imposition of uniformity, for centuries the local population in mission lands was systematically excluded from ordination and theological studies. In this way, the “official” Christian faith continued to be a foreign element in the local cultures and was not seen as part of their identity.

In all, there were some honorable exceptions to this tendency of uniformity. Especially important were the experiences of contextualization that took place by the famous Jesuit missionaries of the East: Valignano in Japan, Ricci in China, Nobili in India. These experiences created a paradigm of genuine efforts towards inculturation. The approach of these missionaries towards evangelization was the result of the Ignatian spirituality they shared, a spirituality focused on finding God in all creation.<sup>6</sup> The many forms this missionary effort took in the different corners of the world is based on the insistence of relating the Gospel to the local cultures where God was already present and acting. From the beginning these missionaries asked permission for the local Christians to live their faith according to their unique cultural reference. The missionaries felt called to adopt the clothing proper to the culture. They prepared the local people for ministry. Even the priestly formation process was inculturated. The missionaries also understood the importance of taking advantage of particular virtues found in the rich cultural traditions. Unfortunately, the centers of power in Europe did not understand these efforts. The famous “Chinese Rites Controversy” and the final resolution reached by the Pope in 1715 against the adoption of local practices (meaning not European) within the Christian faith terminated this model of evangelization. The disastrous consequences of this decision in the evangelization of the East are well known.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Estrada, Juan Antonio, “El cristianismo en una sociedad multirreligiosa y plural”, (Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 3.3), [on line] <<http://www.exodo.org/textos/23.htm>>

<sup>6</sup> Ross, Andrew C., “Alessandro Valignano, S.J.”, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, October 1999, 504.

This movement towards uniformity was present in all of Western Christianity. The missionary style of the protestant churches was no different. In fact, many of the missionaries in Asia felt that the condemnation of the Chinese and Malabar Rites by the Catholic authorities was justified and necessary. The Protestants also felt that these local cultural practices “contaminated” the Christian message. History has shown that at the bottom of this perception was an ethno-centric defense of a personal cultural identity rather than a threat to the Gospel. It was not until the XX century that the Protestant congregations focused on the model “plant the Church” in the strategic calls to the “three selves:” self-support, self-governance and self-propagation. Its principal effort was converted into reinforcing the local hierarchies of the new Churches with sufficient local resources for survival and missionary development. Nevertheless, the experience demonstrated that this was not enough for the local churches to be considered domestic since the majority of the native hierarchy continued to operate under European models. These local protestant churches ended up having the same problems of lack of identity as the Catholic missionaries had encountered.<sup>7</sup>

The Second Vatican Council was a historically decisive moment in the Catholic Church. Change seemed to be promoted by a spirit of openness and dialogue with the world prevalent at the time of the Council. The church recognized that it could learn from the traditions of different peoples and that one of its main responsibilities was to evaluate, from a faith perspective, what the world had to offer. These two axles, dialogue with the world and discernment of the signs of the times, were to be found in all the ecclesial documents on mission, evangelization and the relationship with cultures. The Pastoral Constitution of the Church, “*Gaudium et Spes*,” provided the theological framework for future endeavors in the inculturation of the Good News. It promoted a methodology that begins with observation and the study of the present reality, followed by discernment under the light of the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition, and thus comes to relevant pastoral actions. The Decree, “*Ad Gentes*” concretized the missionary focus of the ecclesiology developed by *Gaudium et Spes*. It emphasizes the consolidation of the indigenous local churches as the goal for all our evangelization. It is in these local churches that we hope the process of embodying the gospel in the surrounding culture is brought to fruition, becoming evangelizers of other cultures in the future.

In conclusion, we can say that the importance of cultures as ways of embodying the gospel of the Kingdom and the need to express it in diverse cultural frameworks (through inculturation/contextualization), has been an integral part of the Christian mission: take the message of Christ to all nations. Since the beginning of Church history, the Good News was seen as trans-cultural. Each new Christian community, without abandoning its surrounding culture, experienced God as accessible to its symbolic universe, wishing to establish a relationship with them in Christ. This was lived in the birth and consolidation of the local churches that were rooted in the culture of its members. In all, the relationship of Christians with the new cultures was not always positive, as we have clearly seen throughout this section. Each time believers associated the Christian faith to just one particular cultural form of expression, it excluded other possibilities; thus the process of evangelization became difficult or was totally blocked.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hiebert, Paul G., “Gospel and Culture: The WCC Project”, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, April 1997, 200.

Most recently, the Church has discovered that members of cultures completely different from the predominant European culture have profound experiences of God, a different kind of experience and many times complementary to their own. This helps us recognize that God is always experienced, lived and expressed in a specific culture, and that dialogue among these different ways of approaching the mystery can be mutually enriching. The conclusion is that the Christian message of salvation is relevant to all cultures and can be understood, lived and expressed with different cultural references. On the other hand, this signifies that cultures are specific vehicles God's revelation. The Christian faith does not come to destroy cultural identities, but rather to transform them from within, maintaining their own identity.

In all that has been said above, we conclude that sharing the vision of the Good News, the Reign of God and what this implies, is indispensable to having a clear understanding, explicit or implicit, of the meaning of culture. It is important to ask ourselves, "What do we understand by culture?"

## 2. A theoretical framework for understanding culture

The word "culture" evokes many meanings. It was originally used to describe the cultivation of the earth. It comes from Latin semantics, *cultor cultrix, cultus*, meaning the transformation of nature through human efforts for its improvement.<sup>8</sup> This meaning is applied to the physical and mental improvement of the person (*cultus corpori, cultus animi*). It also describes religious practices, meaning divine worship (*cultus religionis, cultus deorum*). It was used, as well, to express a life style, ethnic peculiarities of a people, of a civilization. This is how the term is used in modern Spanish (ex. *cultus Gallorum*, the culture/civilization of the inhabitants of Galia). Now a day, the word culture is used to describe people who are highly educated. Example: When one says, "he has a high level of culture (learning). The person found to be on the opposite pole is considered uncultured, or unlearned.

For our particular analysis, the word culture will apply to the description of a particular society and its way of being. Thus, culture is what humans create or transform the result of human activity. This is different from what is "natural", the "uncultivated", as is. At times culture is defined simply and succinctly: "*Culture is the complex expression of the spirit of a people;*"<sup>9</sup> "*It is the way in which a group of people live, think, feel, organize themselves, celebrate and share life;*"<sup>10</sup> "*Culture is used to indicate the particular way in which people cultivate their relationships with nature, among themselves and with God;*"<sup>11</sup> Other definitions are much more detailed.

The notion of culture is fundamental to anthropology. Throughout the history of this social science there have been various approaches to the phenomenon of diverse cultures. At one point, the **evolutionists** theory

<sup>8</sup> *Diccionario Ilustrado Latino-Español, Español Latino*, Ed. Bibliografía, Barcelona 1991, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Rayan, Samuel, "Local Cultures. Instruments of Incarnated Christian Spirituality", [on line] <[www.sedos.org/english/rayan1.html](http://www.sedos.org/english/rayan1.html)>

<sup>10</sup> Society of Jesus, Documents of the XXXIV General Congregation, Decree Four: Our Mission and Culture, N. 1

<sup>11</sup> Poupard, Paul, Card., *The Gospel and culture on the threshold of the III Millennium*, address at "La Sapienza," University, Rome. May 26, 1998, n. 1.2.

predominated, believing that culture was the result of human beings adapting to various ecological contexts for the purpose of survival; the greater the versatility in adaptation, the greater the capacity for survival. This led defenders of this position (a Darwin social species or the survival of the fittest) to believe that there were certain cultures superior to others, with the disastrous consequences of racism, ethnocentrism and the lack of appreciation for diversity.

In time, other approaches such as **functionalism** arose, the principal task being to describe culture as recurring *functions* regarding costumes and institutions, such as family and social organizations, production methods, rituals which mark key moments in life, etc. Its main representative was Bronislaw Malinowski, along with, Radcliffe-Brown, a functionalist who claimed that the function of maintaining the cultural organizational system is in reality its main function and should be studied more closely.

Contemporarily another school developed that tried to incorporate into the study of culture recently developed elements in research regarding the human mind. This is known as **Cultural and Personality Focus** and its main representative was Margaret Mead. This anthropology tries to connect beliefs and cultural practices with personality. It pioneered studies on the importance of infant experiences in forming decisive behavioral patterns in an adult's life, making it recognizable to the surrounding culture.

Another approach of great influence was the well known **cultural materialism**; it maintains that the principal reason for a culture is the survival of the human being in the face of a hostile environment. Among its main exponents is Marvin Harris. He explains the way in which cultural groups face material limitations: looking for food, clothing and shelter, obtaining tools and mechanical means that facilitate the transformation of the environment, etc. These "specific" restrictions to human survival require material control and this is considered fundamental. Deriving from this, the collective groups can create an imaginary form consisting of religion, moral, and social organization. But these imaginary forms are always secondary in importance and are subordinate to the material aspects of survival.

A school that has become very important in the last few decades is called **structuralism**. Its principal exponent, Lévi-Strauss, has had a definite influence on the evolution of French anthropology, his principle insight being that culture is the concrete, perceptible manifestation of similar psychologies present in all of humanity. These uniformities arise from human mental structures and the thinking processes determined by these structures. In this school the fundamental structural characteristic of the human mind is seeing reality in dichotomies, thinking in terms of opposites that allow for differentiations, while at the same time describing the relationship between these opposites. For this reason in many religious accounts of creation we find combinations such as chaos-order and wild-cultivated. Cultures, as such, are mere variations of the opposites proper to the human mind and the way of resolving them.

Lastly, we find ourselves with the best known theory, **symbolic or interpretative anthropology**. The founder of this North American school of thought is Clifford Geertz known for his famous battle cry: "let the believers speak!" This author affirms the position that the mere description of the

cultural phenomena, as much as we try to explain it, left the researcher without the fundamental elements of culture, that is, the religious experience. This theory believes that the basic task of anthropology consists in interpreting cultural characters in order to make them “intelligible.” For the interpreters, culture is a kind of meta-language through which the members of this collective group communicate with one another, transmitting a sense of shared meaning. According to Clifford Geertz anthropologists try to “converse” with cultures in a cognitive dialogical process that is more difficult than it seems: *“thus, the essence of the semiotic<sup>12</sup> focus of culture is to help us access the conceptual world in which human beings live, that is, in a broad understanding of the term, to converse with them.”*

The idea of conversation, of bi-directional communication is extremely important. It means that everyone has something to say. According to Geertz: *“The idea that the essence of the being human is more clearly revealed in those characteristics of human culture that are universal and not in those that are different from this or that group of people; it is a prejudice we are not obliged to share. It is, perhaps, in the more peculiar characteristics of a culture—in its rare aspects---that we find some of the most instructive revelations of what it means to be generically human.”<sup>13</sup>* With this positive attitude in the face of cultural diversity, the interpretative anthropology is considered especially useful in facilitating intercultural dialogue and the enrichment resulting from it.

For this reason, I propose that the theoretical framework for your reflection on culture, identify, interculturality and universality be based on interpretative anthropology. It has already been mentioned that this school considers culture as intelligible, as a vehicle of meaning, that is to say, interpretive. It proposes a methodology that facilitates “communication” with different cultures.

In the interpretative focus, culture is a historical model filled with meanings expressed in symbols, that is, a system of inherited concepts symbolically expressed by which humans communicate, give continuity and develop the knowledge of reality and its attitudes in the face of life. Once a human group has developed a common symbolic system, the persons that belong to it can use it to share their experiences, interpret reality, describe its relationship and transmit its knowledge to future generations. Culture is then a layered hierarchy of important and meaningful structures. Geertz describes it as such: *“man is an animal submerged in meaningful networks he himself has woven,...culture is that same weave, his own creation. Thus the analysis of culture cannot be a scientific experiment looking for laws, but rather an interpretive science looking for meaning..., I look for an explanation, interpreting social expressions that on the surface appear enigmatic.”<sup>14</sup>*

The **cosmovision** of a culture is fundamental to a semiotic perspective. This terminology refers to *“cognitive and existential aspects: a world vision; the idea that a people shapes its vision of reality purely in terms of efficiency, and its more general ideas around the concept of order. It is their concept of nature,*

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<sup>12</sup> Semiotics is the study of sign processes, or signification and communication, both individually and grouped into sign systems. It includes the study of how meaning is constructed and understood. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotics)

<sup>13</sup> Geertz, Clifford, *The interpretation of cultures*, Gedisa, Barcelona 2001 (11th Reprinting).

<sup>14</sup> For all the definitions written in this section, I suggest consulting: Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, especially chapters IV y V.

*of the person, of society.*” Cosmovision can be thought of as a “**model of**,” that is, a reference point that helps us understand the existence of things and the way they are related among themselves in congruent and intelligible structures. This “model of” attributes culture with its most comprehensive idea of the order and structure of reality, that is, “the state of the world.” All individual and collective experiences will be sifted through the cosmovision, helping us to interpret the perceived phenomena, judging them and thinking of possible alternative actions.

Although cosmovision helps each culture understand reality and feel that it is a “cosmos,” that is, an “order,” and that behind the superficial level there is a meaningful discernible order, this is not enough. A “**model of**” must develop a “**model for**.” In understanding reality I need a model that helps me decide how I should act within that reality. The “**model for**” in interpretive anthropology is called **Ethos**. Geertz’s definition:

Ethos is: *“the moral aspects (and aesthetic) of a determined culture, its evaluation points, its tone, character, quality of life, moral and aesthetic life style, its spirit. It proposes a life style ideally adapted to the state of things described in the cosmovision. It is the underlying attitude of a people in relation to themselves and the world in which they live.*

The ethos of culture provides the person integrated into it acceptable behavioral guidelines, that is, a hierarchy of values (axiology):<sup>15</sup> what is recommended and what is prohibited, points regarding etiquette and good habits, as well as what is considered taboo or bad manners. The ethos proper to a culture is concerned not only with its virtues and the excellence that is recognized and rewarded, but rather by its vices and the low standards that reprove it, everything that evaluates behavior as acceptable or not. These judgment criteria are certainly associated with the “cosmovision.” If we had to express it in a single sentence we could say:

**Because things are the way they are (cosmovision), we must act in this way (ethos)**

Ethos is not the only thing that determines the cosmovision. There is also an influence from the other end. Action, in a prescribed form following rules and assuring that things turn out right, brings about a positive reinforcement of the vision of reality that is presented by the cosmovision.

Perhaps the great genius in this cultural interpretation system is that the union between cosmovision and the ethos proper to a given culture comes about thanks to what we call **religion**. For interpretative anthropology religion is the center of every culture. With the term religion, we not only describe belief systems, such as Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam, but all the paraphernalia proper to secularized societies: for example, protest demonstrations, soccer games, and music concerts by the contemporary popular artists. All these can be considered religious acts because they serve as a bridge between the cosmovision and ethos. Surely, the interpretive focus of culture is a religious system, a combination of symbols with reference to the transcendent (God) or the transcendental (justice, rights, ethics, etc). that unites the behavior of a social group (ethos) with the concept this group has of reality (cosmovision).

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<sup>15</sup> Axiology is the study of quality or value.

For those who practice a religious system, this appears to obtain a genuine and truthful knowledge of the essential conditions of how life should be lived. All religious symbols affirm that humankind's good consists in living realistically, the difference lying in the vision of reality created by those symbols. For example, in all cultures death is a source of fear and meaninglessness, placing the human person in contact with the absurdness of the end of existence and the pain of losing loved ones and one's own life. Different religious acts, for example a funeral ceremony in a Buddhist temple, help the people of that culture to face an absurd fact, but a real one, making it a livable experience within a structure that gives it meaning. The same happens to a Lenin Marxist atheist in the presentation of offerings at the Red Plaza in Soviet Moscow during a celebration commemorating the fallen soldiers in the country's defense. Although it is a non-believing country, inclusively of atheistic militant conviction, the ritual of the secular ceremony honoring the fallen soldiers has the same goal, converting a painful and meaninglessness deed into something rational and filled with meaning. Down deep, both acts are religious: uniting a cosmivision with ethos.

Geertz defined religion as: "1) A system of symbols that 2) establishes penetrating and lasting feelings and motivations between people 3) formulating concepts of existence 4) dressing these concepts in an aura of effectiveness so that 5) the feelings and motivation look like the same reality.

Religion, by uniting "ethos" and the "cosmovision," attributes to social values what, perhaps, they most need to make them obligatory, an objective conviction of unquestionable realism. In "religious" acts such as a pilgrimage to Mecca or assisting a concert by Marilyn Mason, their intrinsic values (submission to the absoluteness of God, or the fascination for the nothingness of postmodern nihilism) are lived, not like personal subjective options, but like conditions implicitly imposed on a world uniquely and decisively structured: "because the world is like that, we must act in this manner." This makes the members of a culture feel that religious acts effectively and forcefully synthesize one's knowledge of life. It is an empirical "demonstration" (that is, one that can be experienced by the participants) of the significant relationship between the values in which we believe and the general order of existence.

In summary, and once again quoting Geertz:<sup>16</sup>

***"What people most value, fear and hate are painted on their cosmivision, symbolized in their religion and expressed in their life style as a people."***

In all, the same author has said that "a totally adequate cosmivision that embraces all of humanity is not possible. Behind all the pretensions of absolute and final knowledge is the sense of the irrationality of human life, the sense that it cannot be limited to categories. The presence of a symbol that recalls the

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<sup>16</sup> A French philosopher and cultural critic. He arrived at a similar conclusion: "The images and symbols precisely constitute what could be called the daily life experience of a historical group. This is what I mean by the core elements, "mythic-ethics" being the cultural foundation of a people." Similar to the interpretative anthropologists, Ricoeur felt that these images and symbols are not immediately accessible. They constitute the cultural basis of a particular people and they determine their spontaneous reaction to certain situations.

*falsehood of human pretensions in religious or moral infallibility is perhaps the surest sign of spiritual maturity.”*

Another basic insight developed by interpretive analysis is that the “religious” dimension offers a special relationship to the universe of meaning in a culture. If I want to approach this meaning, it is fundamental that I first do a “**religious ethnography**,” a detailed list of the practices in which culture finds its manner of understanding the world (cosmovision) and its behavioral directives (ethos) reinforced. In religious rituals, with their particular symbols, I find myself with a distilled version of what is most important and fundamental to the culture that produced them. Through religious acts I can, to a certain degree, approach the way in which the culture conceives reality (cosmovision) and the guidelines for judgement and behavior based on its values and aesthetic appreciation (ethos).

In this interpretive cultural perspective (semiotic) the concept of speech as a vehicle for communicating content has a fundamental role. We know that the term language has many meanings. Perhaps the most common is attached to a specific language. The spoken and written language makes communication between two people possible, helping build common meaningful structures. Language, through its grammatical structure, can also be a symbol that transmits values found at the heart of a culture. Thus, the study of a language and its grammatical structure should be considered central to cultural analysis. Moreover, regarding linguistic studies, the literary critique of popular narratives also provides an excellent medium in accessing the cosmovision of a culture.

In conclusion, all authors are in agreement that cultures are always dynamic entities; that is, they are in permanent transformation. The rhythms of these changes vary greatly from one culture to another, but they all evolve. They can also die; in the majority of cases, they are absorbed by a more powerful dominant culture. This assimilation can be considered a form of evolution, of transformation. For as strong as the absorbing culture may be, it does not remain free from some kind of transformation by the culture that is absorbed.

What is expressed above is a general approach to culture as a way of transmitting the Christian faith. It is an initial encounter with the dimensions of cultural analysis that will be used in the General Chapter reflection.

Personal reading of the document, sharing in community with the idea of helping one another *assimilate* its content.