



Efforts of Inculturation in the Vincentian Mission in Indonesia

Lorentius Iswandir

STFT Widya Sasana, Malang, Indonesia

iswandircm@yahoo.com

Abstract

Faith and culture are two crucial points of more intensive concern to the Church today in its mission. The Church has an interest in proclaiming the Gospel to all the world. However, the Church must pay attention to human culture if its proclamation is to be well received. Inculturation is, therefore, a decisive process in the mission of the Church because faith and Christianity must be rooted in the local culture and become an integral part of the identity of the local people. As missionaries, the Vincentians contribute to the mission of the Church. This article does not discuss the theory of inculturation, but rather how efforts of inculturation are carried out in missionary praxis. Using the historical ecclesiological method and reflection on the Vincentian charism, it shows, on the one hand, the inculturation efforts in the mission of the Church, which the Dutch Vincentian in Indonesia has carried out in the past, and on the other hand, it is reflected in the deepening of Vincentian spirituality.

La fe y la cultura son dos puntos cruciales que preocupan hoy más intensamente a la Iglesia en su misión. La Iglesia tiene interés en anunciar el Evangelio a todo el mundo. Sin embargo, la Iglesia debe prestar atención a la cultura humana para que su anuncio sea bien acogido. La inculturación es, por tanto, un proceso decisivo en la misión de la Iglesia, porque la fe y el cristianismo deben arraigar en la cultura local y convertirse en parte integrante de la identidad de la población local. Como misioneros, los vicentinos contribuyen a la misión de la Iglesia. Este artículo no trata de la teoría de la inculturación, sino de cómo se llevan a cabo los esfuerzos de inculturación en la praxis misionera. Utilizando el método histórico eclesiológico y la reflexión sobre el carisma vicenciano, muestra, por un lado, los esfuerzos de inculturación en la misión de la Iglesia, que los vicencianos holandeses en Indonesia han llevado a cabo en el pasado, y por otro lado, se refleja en la profundización de la espiritualidad vicenciana.

La foi et la culture sont deux points cruciaux qui préoccupent plus intensément l'Église d'aujourd'hui dans sa mission. L'Église a intérêt à proclamer l'Évangile au monde entier. Cependant, l'Église doit prêter attention à la culture humaine si elle veut que sa proclamation soit bien reçue. L'inculturation est donc un processus décisif dans la mission de l'Église, car la foi et le christianisme doivent être enracinés dans la culture locale et devenir partie intégrante de l'identité des populations locales. En tant que missionnaires, les Vincentiens contribuent à la mission de l'Église. Cet article ne traite pas de la théorie de l'inculturation, mais plutôt de la manière dont les efforts d'inculturation sont mis en œuvre dans la pratique missionnaire. En utilisant la méthode ecclésiologique historique et la réflexion sur le charisme vincentien, il montre, d'une part, les efforts d'inculturation dans la mission de l'Église, que le Vincentien hollandais en Indonésie a réalisés dans le passé, et d'autre part, il se reflète dans l'approfondissement de la spiritualité vincentienne.



Keywords: Inculturation of Christian Faith. Javanese Culture. Vincentian Mission. Pohsarang Church.

1. Introduction

2023 marked the 100th anniversary of the Dutch Vincentian mission in Indonesia. During this century-long missionary journey, the question arises: what has the Vincentian mission contributed to the local church and the mission of the universal Church? To answer this question, the author takes up the theme of inculturation, which was given special attention by the Dutch Vincentian missionaries in their early mission strategies in Indonesia. How did they make inculturation efforts in their mission?

2. Between the stigma of “colonizers” and the manifestation of “God's love”

In carrying out their mission, these missionaries were in a self-contradictory disposition. On the one hand, they were Dutch, which in reality at that time was colonizer. On the other hand, they came as missionaries, wanting to show the face of a merciful God. The colonizers came to gain maximum benefit for themselves; the missionaries came to empower the locals and not to seek personal gain. The colonizers often resorted to violence, oppression, dispossession; whereas the missionaries tried to approach the indigenous people in a gentle and loving way that uplifted human dignity.

Long before the Vincentian missionaries came to Indonesia, the Dutch had been in the archipelago since 1596 on a spice trading expedition. These traders then formed the VOC (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*), which was founded in 1602. During VOC control all Catholic missionary activities were blocked and banned. They destroyed the missionary works that had been carried out by Catholic missionaries in Indonesia since the 14th century and also by St. Francis Xavier in 1546-1547 in Maluku.

When the Dutch missionaries came to preach Christianity, the natives stigmatized the Christianity as “the religion of the colonizers”. Who would want to follow the religion of the colonizers? It must be fought! Therefore, evangelization for Dutch missionaries in the colonial period had a huge challenge.

To eradicate the stigma of "colonizer religion" required creative efforts. The missionaries tried to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. They came not with weapons, but with love. This love was manifested in tangible works, such as visiting their homes, building schools, establishing clinics and hospitals. These works are expected to be a means of proclaiming salvation in the Christian faith and a tangible manifestation of God's love for the local people.

3. Cultural approach as a mission strategy

One of the Dutch Vincentian missionaries, who had great dedication and attention to local culture in Java was Jan Wolters CM (1893-1954). What and how did he do in proclaiming the faith with a cultural approach?

a. Learning the local language

Jan Wolters CM's attention to the local culture began with his diligence to learn Javanese. He followed the advice of the Superior missionis Theophile de Backere CM,

who emphasized the importance of learning Javanese: If a missionary speaks only Dutch, then he can only communicate with the Dutch, who in the mission land are only about five thousand people. But if he learns Javanese, he will be able to communicate with more than five million people.

His mission assignment also determined the strong impetus for Jan Wolters to learn the local language. While his four confreres were assigned to Surabaya, he had the special task of traveling to villages outside Surabaya, where the people spoke Javanese. The first step was to learn their language to communicate with the Javanese and understand their culture. The proclamation of the Christian faith will also be easier to understand if it is communicated in the listeners' language. As a missionary, Jan Wolters wanted to realize the hope of St. Vincent, to go from place to place in the spirit of *zelus animarum*, winning souls for Christ.

Jan Wolters and other missionaries tried to use Javanese not only in daily life, but also in liturgical services. It is reported that at Christmas in 1927, mass was celebrated in Javanese for the first time at the HIS school in Blitar. European Christmas carols were sung in Javanese. The Javanese were delighted that they could hear the message of the Gospel and the truths of faith through the priest's sermon in their language.

In order to successfully celebrate a Javanese mass, the Vincentians received the support of the Catholic teacher C. Sindoeperwata. The teacher celebrated his own wedding in the Christian liturgy and was accompanied by a traditional Javanese ceremony in which not only Catholics took part. This event became a testimony of their faith for the non-Christians, a sign that the Christian faith and their own culture could engage with each other.

In their mission, the Vincentians tried to use the local language and traditional culture in their church services. This was a first step towards inculturation in order to root the Christian faith in the culture of Java so that the preaching of the Christian faith did not have to be seen as “foreign”.

For the Vincentian, learning a foreign language in addition to one's own is a necessity and even in some sense a must. In the prayer repetition of June 9, 1658 (CCD XII, 24-26) St. Vincent affirmed it as a consequence of the congregation's vocation, to go and proclaim the Gospel to the whole world. He expressed: “How can missionaries go to the whole world to proclaim the Good News, if they know only their language?” St. Vincent quoted St. Paul's expression of *fides ex auditu*, faith through hearing (Romans 10:17). Therefore, St. Vincent invited his missionaries to pray and ask for his grace, to be able to learn foreign languages well.

From the Scripture passage, missionaries can refer to the Pentecost event, where the apostles spoke in a language, which the listeners understood (Acts 2:1-13). As missionaries entered new territories, the proclamation of the gospel was also adapted to the language of the audience. Scripture texts were translated into foreign languages. The Old Testament texts written in Hebrew and the New Testament texts written in Greek were translated into Latin and then into the various languages of the nations around the world. This translation became a concrete form of a process, called inculturation, that brought the gospel and culture together.

b. Building a Church with Javanese Architecture

In carrying out his mission, Jan Wolters had great concern for promoting local culture, which was realized by building a church with Javanese architecture. Why didn't he just design a church with European architecture? What was the purpose of building a church with a Javanese style?

The idea to build a church with a building style that incorporates the peculiarities of local history and religiosity aims to root Christianity in their culture. Jan Wolters said: "Catholic doctrine will be incorporated purely, but the external form can adapt as much as possible to the people that receive it. What is good will be retained, and what is incompatible with Catholic doctrine and tradition will be Christianized or replaced with something else. In this way, people everywhere became Catholic while not changing their original identity. That is, they became Catholic while still being Chinese or Javanese."¹ At that time, during the colonial period, the shape of the churches built generally followed the European style, or at least the Dutch culture, because the Dutch wanted to preserve their own culture in their colony.



To realize his idea, Jan Wolters collaborated with Dutch architect and archaeologist, Ir. Henri Maclaine Pont, to build a Catholic church with a Javanese architectural style. The church was built in Pohsarang, a village on the eastern slopes of the Wilis Mountains near Kediri, East Java. Construction of the church began in 1936 and the completed church was consecrated in 1938.

The church was built in the style of ancient Javanese culture, during the heyday of the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit from the 13th century to the 16th century. This architecture reminds the Javanese of their own historical and cultural roots, of which they are proud.

The spatial structure of the Pohsarang Church building is based on the "Kraton" palace in Java, which is divided into two parts,

¹ Wolters CM, Jan: *Gereja Katolik - Jawa di Pohsarang*, in: Tondowidjojo CM, John (transl.): *Menapak Jejak Misionaris Lazaris*, vol. 2, Surabaya 1995, 123-128, 127. Boelaars quotes the dissertation *Evangelisatie en Kultuurverandering* by the Dutch missionary Michael Coomans MSF, who worked in Indonesia in the diocese of Samarinda: "The proclamation of the Gospel in Indonesia will only bear much fruit if it absorbs, processes and integrates the riches of the Indonesian soil and the Indonesian people (which are also given by God). The model or example for this is none other than the incarnation of the Son of God, in which an "admirabile commercium" (miraculous exchange) was established between divinity and humanity. Similarly, the task of a young local church is not only to pass on spiritual things from above, but also to enrich itself with the riches of the local people. These riches are their habits and traditions, their wisdom and prudence, their art and customs." Boelaars OFM Cap, Huub J.W.M.: *Indonesianisasi*, 25.

namely an inner and an outer area, i.e. one part is private and the other is open to the public. You enter the front public part through the archway, while the king's private room is located in the rear part. The Javanese who wish to introduce themselves to the king enter the palace through the gate, cross the public area “Balai Agung” or “Pendopo” and thus reach the king's more quietly situated chambers. The division of the church space can be interpreted as follows: the faithful enter the house of God, they leave a hectic, profane world and first pass through the “Porta Coeli” gate, they enter a hall of quiet gathering and finally reach a sacred place where the King of Kings dwells. Inside the church there are relief carvings depicting stories from the Holy Scriptures, the stories from the Old Testament on the left, such as the sacrifice of Abraham and Moses striking his staff on the rock, and opposite on the right the stories from the New Testament, such as the miracle of Jesus at Cana and the multiplication of the bread. These made it easier for the Javanese, who were still illiterate, to understand the stories in the holy scriptures.

The inner building of the church has the shape of a dome, while the outer building has the shape of a boat. These shapes are interpreted by the Javanese as the mountain “Gunung Meru” and the great porch “Balai Agung” of Majapahit, the place of the king's meeting with his people; Catholics associate them with the story of the Flood, according to which Noah set his ark on dry land on the mountain of Ararat (cf. Gen 8:4). It is a link between the local culture and the biblical narrative.

The church is built on top of a mountain. For the Javanese, a mountain that connects the earth and the sky has great significance. Some Javanese meditate in a quiet place on the mountain for a specific purpose, e.g. to strive for mystical perfection “Manunggaling Kawula Gusti” (union of the self with God), to obtain divine signs or visions and to gain supernatural powers. On the mountain, they are united in harmony with the universe and the divine.

The replica of the “Balai Agung” porch of Majapahit, which has an umbrella-shaped dome and resembles a large tree, symbolizes for the Javanese the protection of the king for his people. Back then, when the Javanese sought supernatural power or the divine by meditating under large trees or in the mountains, the dome of the church became a theological symbol of God's protection for anyone who came to worship him. For God wants all people to be saved.

c. Building an open-air amphitheater

In addition to the Javanese church in Pohsarang, Jan Wolters completed the facilities and infrastructure for evangelization by building an open-air theater stage, an amphitheater, which could accommodate around 7000 spectators. The amphitheater replica in the style of Roman times was built under the influence of Javanese art and culture and used for catechetical purposes.

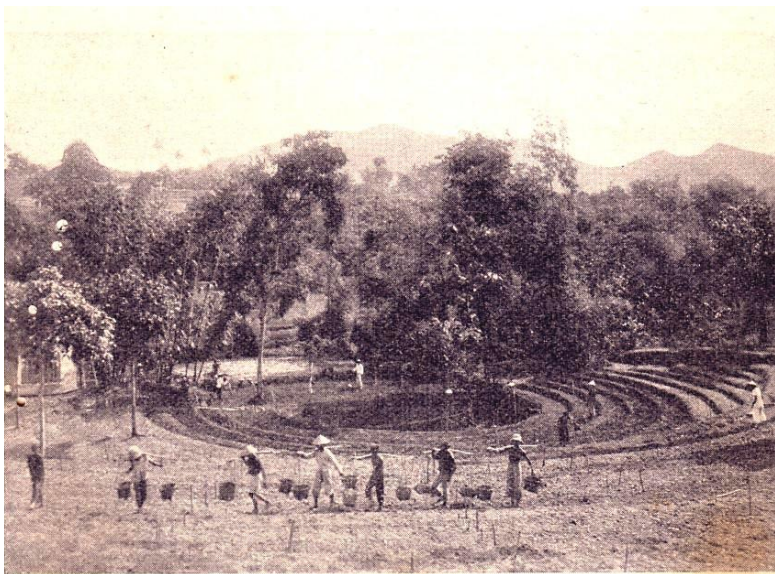
Stories from the Holy Scriptures were performed in the amphitheater, for example Abraham and Isaac, David and Goliath, Joseph in Egypt, from Saul to Paul, the nativity play and the passion play. This theater thus served as a means of catechesis. The actors were mainly from the simple rural population, similar to the Passion Play in Oberammergau, Germany.

Most of the performers were not trained actors and shared the roles among themselves. They brought their herds of cattle, goats and chickens onto the stage in order to perform the stories from the Holy Scriptures more authentically. They also performed Javanese dances on the sidelines of the theater performances to entertain the audience. In

this way, the Vincentians proclaimed the good news of the Gospel to the rural population in the mission through folk art and local culture.

The theater became a time of personal and intensive encounters of the missionaries with many people, both those involved as actors and helpers to prepare the show. They consisted of both Catholics and non-Catholics. This encounter became an opportunity to catechize and evangelize them. Through theater, the proclamation of the Gospel is carried out with audio-visual communication, so that listeners and spectators can pay attention more eagerly and capture the message better.

Jan Wolters CM also put the good news into practice in daily life by setting up a workshop and recruiting carving experts from other places to train the villagers. He then



built stores and businesses so that they could market their craft in the form of fired ceramics, carvings of crosses and statues of saints. Following the example of Oberammergau, people came to see the play and return home with pious carvings. The poor rural population benefited greatly from this missionary work. The missionaries proclaimed

the good news not only on a spiritual level through their preaching from the pulpit in the church, but also on a practical level by improving economic conditions, among other things.

With the construction of the Pohsarang church, the Christian faith was adapted to the culture of the people. The building was made of local materials, e.g. river stones, and involved the local people. The church was full and attended by people who were involved in the construction. The people had the feeling that they owned the church themselves.

In their missionary work, the Vincentians convey the message of the Gospel to the local culture through inculturation: they learn the local language so that the message of the Gospel is easier to understand. They examine the socio-geographical conditions, history, customs, art and the religious values contained therein, then harmonize these with the Christian values and truths of faith. This was done in the hope that the faith received by the Javanese in their own culture could take root there, as Jan Wolters said: „The impression of 'imports from the West' can be removed here.” Their new religion, he argued, is not far removed from their own art, traditions and values that are so deeply rooted in their hearts and deeply rooted in their lives. Here, then, they would be Catholic while remaining Javanese. So by embracing the Christian faith, their identity is not uprooted, but rather transformed by a new light from the Gospel.

4. Love God and others

In his conference on May 30, 1659, Vincentius a Paulo reminded his confreres of the call to go into all the world, to set people's hearts on fire, to do what the Son of God did. „He came to set the world on fire in order to inflame it with His love. What do we have to desire but that it may burn and consume everything. My dear confreres, let's reflect on that, please. It's true then, that I'm sent not only to love God but to make Him loved. It's not enough for me to love God, if my neighbour doesn't love Him.” (CCD XII, 215).

In the implementation of their mission in Indonesia, the Dutch missionaries, especially Jan Wolters CM, have shown missionary efforts through inculturation, so that God is increasingly loved also by the indigenous people. By being respected and elevated by their culture, they will in turn accept the missionaries' preaching and love what the missionaries love, namely following Jesus.

The Church looks positively on human culture. “Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature.” (GS 53). The culture of the local people can be explored by missionaries through the first step, which is learning the language. Language becomes the entry point to learn their history and values and continue the process of inculturation to the Christian faith. Successful inculturation will allow Christianity to take root in the mission area. Inculturation efforts with all its challenges can only be done with a great fire of love and with a passion for saving souls. “If love of God is a fire, zeal is its flame; if love is a sun, zeal is its ray. Zeal is unconditional in the love of God.” (CCD XII, 250).

References

- Armada Riyanto, F.X. 2003. 80 Th. Romo-Romo CM di Indonesia. Kaleidoskop misi. Panorama peristiwa misioner. Album misionaris, Surabaya 2003.
- Armada Riyanto, F.X. 2023. Sejarah misi Surabaya. 1810-1961. 100 Tahun CM Indonesia, Surabaya 2023.
- Boelaars OFM Cap, Huub J.W.M. 2005. Indonesianisasi. Het omvormingsproces van de katholieke kerk in Indonesië tot de Indonesische katholieke kerk, Kampen 1991 [R. Hardawiryana transl.): Indonesianisasi. Dari Gereja Katolik di Indonesia menjadi Gereja Katolik Indonesia, Yogyakarta 2005].
- Boonekamp CM, Piet. 1974. Sejarah Gereja Katolik di wilayah Keuskupan Surabaya, in: Muskens, M.P.M. (Hg.): Sejarah Gereja Katolik Indonesia 3b, Ende-Flores, 949-999.
- Budiyanto CM, Aloisius. 2010. Perwujudan Falsafah dan Arsitektur Jawa pada Bangunan Gereja Pohsarang, edited by Jauhari Atmoko CM, Malang.
- Iswandir, Lorentius. 2023. Mission als Verkündigung des Heils. Der Beitrag der Vinzentiner zur Mission der Kirche in Indonesien, Sankt Ottilien.
- Iswandir, Lorentius. 2023. Mutate. Rm Jan Wolters CM. Seni sebagai kereta misi, Surabaya 2023.
- Jessup, Helen. 1985. Dutch architectural visions of the Indonesian tradition, in: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1523090> 138-161 - abgerufen am 14.04.2020.

Tondowidjojo CM, John (translator). 1985 Menapak Jejak Misionaris Lazaris II (1936-1945), Surabaya 1995.