

A Monastic Community in a Peruvian Aymara Indigenous Context: From Inculturation to Interculturality

- brother Simón Pedro

OUR MONASTIC ADVENTURE OF INSERTION INTO THE Peruvian Altiplano among the Aymara indigenous people began 22 years ago on the shores of Lake Titicaca. With hardly a breath of awareness as an inserted contemplative community, we began to realize that to deeply love a people and their culture. It is not sufficient to truly understand them. As Jesus at the Samaritan well, we had a sense of the profound mystery of this people, their Tradition and spirituality; yet we questioned ourselves, do we have the adequate pails for drawing their life-giving water.

As we continued to live a faithful presence among the Aymara people, what we as monks call our vow of stability, we had to admit that we were not able to understand this mystery. We asked ourselves, "Is it necessary to understand?" Our universalism, i.e., "our catholicity," is not by its nature simply theoretical or intellectual. In my personal experience, I am convinced today that James and Peter did not grasp much about Paul's cultural and theological problems in the Antioch community. Nevertheless they trusted the movement of the Spirit of Pentecost within the new gentile Christian communities and in their pastors.

Therefore, we ourselves come before them with very humble hearts and with unbounding respect. In contemplative wonder and humble admiration we can only testify to the privileged icon of God's mystery that gifts us in the Tradition and spiritualities of the Andes.

From Naiveté to Modesty

As a scholar, I had studied and taught Andean culture and religion, and worked a long time in traditional Andean communities. I was eager to translate into concrete reality the intuitions I had encountered and which had matured with over many long years.

Initially, our pretentious enthusiasm and naiveté expressed itself in several ways. We were determined to found a fully-inserted monastic

community that lived in the same kind of dwellings and under the same socio-economic conditions as our indigenous neighbors. We immediately wanted to inculturate our lifestyle, especially our liturgy and prayer. We began studying their language without any idea of its complexity and richness. Neither did we take into account our own intellectual limitations nor our incapacity to think in completely different cultural concepts.

Throughout this first stage of our monastic presence in the Altiplano, the local bishop was a very generous but idealistic man who came from Lima. He urged us to create a genuine Aymara Rite for the celebration of Eucharist. Without hesitation we began to imagine and give form to this undertaking. Were we not Benedictines, the leaders in liturgical matters!?

As we partially completed this task, we already had some Aymara aspirants. During those first six years, we lived in rented houses similar to the peasant houses of our neighbors. On three or four occasions we celebrated our new, supposedly sophisticated Aymara Catholic Rite. Our indigenous friends viewed such a “Disney-like” performance with astonishment, respect, yet with a guarded response. We eventually understood that we were making a mistake. The original Andean religion has its own rites and a genuine way to encounter God. It was not necessary to draw them away from their roots and transplant them into an artificial and faulty religious ground.

Added to this, the first indigenous monk candidates found our way of life in the monastery absolutely incomprehensible. The indigenous do not pray in a chapel but in their “chacra” (field) or on the top of their sacred mountains. But there was further paradox with reference to our simple monastic lifestyle. A young Aymara candidate once said to me: “How can I live all my life in a house just like my father’s? I want to move forward, even if it is just a little”.

Soon we began to uncover deep racist wounds among the Peruvian people—first of all between the two Andean ethnic groups (Quechua and Aymara), and then the mestizos from the coast towards the indigenous in the mountains. Through these experiences we came to know that it is not enough to love a people to have a true understanding of them. Evangelical good will is not sufficient in the face of historical and cultural wounds that we have supported, or even more, have inflicted directly on them. As European monks we learned over time to assume our complicity in the rejection of this culture through our recalcitrant and unconscious paternalistic feelings of superiority. The hour of intellectual and religious decolonization had come.

Adoption beyond Inculturation

Inculturation is not the theater where we act out a fabricated story. Our Andean brothers and sisters bear in their persons the inculturated message of Jesus as they have come to value and understand their faith without foreign intrusion. They know perfectly well how to interpret the Gospel

for their own people. We do not believe anymore in the “inculturation” of the faith. Our hope is just to recognize the true and fully Christian value of their distinctive yet vibrant spirituality.

A religious community from a distant shore whose hope is to be fully inserted in an indigenous culture must proceed in a way of “mutual adoption,” and it must proceed over an extended period of time. With a patient humility, expressed through a simple presence and hospitality, we gently say to this people: we want to live with you and share your day-to-day poverty, your cultural and social challenges, but only if you give us permission. If you open your doors, we shall enter, whenever and in whatever way we are welcomed. In the meantime, we welcome and open our home to you. Come in as you wish and in whatever way you find helpful. The “adoption” of each other requires a respectful patience so that as faithfulness and mutual confidence grow, fear, deep-seated hatred and mistrust are dispelled. As monks, in light of our vow of monastic stability, we say to our neighbors that we will journey with them only if it is acceptable to them and in whatever way they choose.

We sincerely want to open ourselves to the sufferings and joys of all - the children, elders and young people. If they invite us, we participate in their “fiestas,” and we walk with them in their moments of mourning. We enter as simple participants into their Andean rites. At times my friend, Don José, who is a traditional Andean priest, asks me to unite together our two rituals (Christian and Andean). We then celebrate what I could call a “mixed rite” where each of us assumes our own religious responsibility. This is a very joyful “adoption” experience.

In this way we have passed from a false ideological inculturation to a humbler daily inter-cultural practice without idealizing the indigenous world. Human beings are good and bad everywhere. The poor or the indigenous are not better or worse because they are poor and indigenous. We are all brothers and sisters in sin and forgiveness, holiness and mediocrity. Part of our commitment of love for this culture is that we carry their burdens as our own.

I feel now, after 40 years in Peru and 22 years with the Aymara people, that we as neighbors have begun this process the “adoption” spoken about above. We do not need to show spectacular signs, but only to live our life fully and to love each other faithfully. Now they are our people and I hope that they are beginning to believe in some ways that we are theirs. And if God wishes, as I said to my first neighbor 22 years ago, they shall bury us among them.

What will be our future? It does not matter. We only want to be faithful to our wandering with this people and welcome what Saint Ignatius spoke of as the “movement of the Spirit”. Yes, we trust in the Spirit and we also trust the revelation of the Spirit to be in our Aymara friends. We are happy living among them, and we choose to live our monastic life in their midst. ■