

ENCULTURATION OF THE CHARISMA CONVICTIONS AND ATTITUDES

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Premise: before putting down these ideas on enculturation of the charisma I read the report prepared by Fr. Salvador Medina, since it its contents that will characterize this day. My presentations does not to intend to issue a comment, nor to discuss the logic of his report, which I have appreciated, especially for the courage and clarity of some of his statements; its purpose is only to add some points in order to promote an in depth study and discussion this afternoon.

I make this presentation, following this outline:

- first of all, in as much as possible, I shall say something on the experience of Allamano regarding this topic;
- then, I will try to answer an ever present question: which one is the intellectual process for the enculturation of the charisma; which convictions must be privileged;
- finally, I will try to indicate some attitudes that I consider important so that a community of consecrated people and each one of its member may favor the enculturation of the charisma itself.

I. ENCULTURATION EXPERIENCE IN J. ALLAMANO

Since we are talking of the “charisma”, it seems logical for me to start from our Founder, because it is him who, in the first place, has received the gift of this original charisma and has then transferred it to us. I place to myself a simple question: what experience has Allamano had regarding enculturation? The answer is not that simple, because we have very few sources (almost none) that could directly enlighten this aspect. Nevertheless one element is certain: Allamano has lived and has expressed himself fully integrated in his own culture, that is, as an Italian and a Piedmont man. Undoubtedly he has impressed in his two Institutes a way of thinking, of living and operating linked to such culture of the origins. This is a concrete fact that our history confirms. So as not be misunderstood, I can add that our Founder was not a “closed” person, otherwise he would not have founded two Institutes for the mission. He knew how to look beyond his own borders. His culture has not restricted him, but it has certainly characterized him.

From the theoretical view, in as much as I have been able to understand, I think that I can make some affirmations of a general character.

1. First affirmation: there is no proof that our Founder had expressed a doctrine regarding the enculturation of the charisma. He has never spoken explicitly about it. Perhaps he has not even perceived the problem, or at least he has not had any experience of it, as it has been the case for the other founders of his same time. It is enough to think of his insistence on fidelity to the spirit which for him was not just an interior attitude, but also a concrete way of living and operating. More over, one must keep in mind that the Founder, perhaps on account of doubts connected to his culture, has not immediately opened the doors of the Institute to candidates coming from other regions, but only little by little, perhaps pushed by the circumstances (which he, nevertheless, has known how to interpret in a positive way). What matters is that he has opened up!

Among the many possible quotations, I report these that made us understand how at the beginning not everything was clear, or easy, for Allamano. First of all the testimony of Fr. Bellani, a

native of Brescia: «After Sunday in Albis of 1904, I went to do the spiritual exercises in the usual diocesan house of the Filippini Fathers. Preacher was a Jesuit father from the house in via Garibaldi in Turin. [...]. He is the one who informed me of the foundation of the Institute. Nevertheless, these are his words, the Institute is regional, that is, for the two Ecclesial Provinces of Turin and Vercelli: the founder is a holy priest; go and visit him and, who knows, he may be able, anyhow, to find a way of accepting you. And that's the way it happened; the following week I left for Turin and went to the Consolata, looking for canon Allamano. The first welcome, so cordial, stole my heart; I thought: this holy priest will certainly accept me. He wanted to know everything about my vocation and the difficulties I had met, when I had been ordained to the priesthood, etc. Listen, he added, there is the difficulty that the Institute is regional, nevertheless it will become international. You, therefore, could be the first to enter the Institute, coming from outside Piedmont, then Divine Providence will provide».¹ Keep in mind that this dialogue took place in 1904!

I report also these pleasant words of Allamano to the Consolata Sisters and that I take from the testimony of Sr. F. Giuseppina Tempo: «[...] But I wanted only women from Piedmont, at the most I would have accepted those from Northern Italy, but the Cardinal? He said to me: “and why do you want to restrict the number of Missionary Sisters? Take them all”. Even in this matter I gave in, but I feared that the difference of character between girls from the northern Italy and those from the south could be a rather big obstacle for a life together in the missions. Thus, you are now from all parts ».² The last words show that Allamano has experimented and admitted that cultural differences have not been an obstacle to life together and to the mission.

2. Second affirmation on the experience of Allamano on enculturation: Allamano has been prudent and attentive so that his missionaries would not unduly squash the native people's customary ways of behaving (obviously I am making reference to the people of Kenya). Regarding this reference is usually made to some of his interventions which I, too, wish to report here:

In 1904, the Founder wrote to the Superior in Kenya: «I have read the diary of theologian Borda, I notice that he strongly attacked the goma [local dances]; for charity sake, let's go slowly... [...]. Your Lordship will see on the spot what to do and give to everybody a sure line of behavior on this and on many other acts».³ Two years later, on December 8, 1906, in a circular letter to the missionaries he returned on the subject: «What you have achieved so far is the renouncement of their mistakes, what is left to do is more difficult, the renouncement of everything that in their custom is contrary to the divine commandments, starting the true Christian life».⁴ As it can be seen, Allamano does not want that the people be asked to give up all their customs, but just those that are contrary to the divine commandments. This attitude is very wise.

3. Third affirmation: Allamano, wise person, did not presume to immediately understand everything, but realistically he intended to make one step at a time. He did not want to be hasty in finding solutions, without first understanding well the reality. After just one year from the arrival of the first four missionaries in Kenya, on September 18, 1903, he wrote to the superior, Fr. T. Gays: «In everything we must just pursue the greater good and the glory of God; that if sometimes my dispositions could be better, it is enough that they be good while waiting to improve them when you will consider it opportune, once you have acquired more local knowledge».⁵ A few years later, on July 21, 1912, he wrote to the missionaries: «These directives regarding the life in the missions, I could not give them to you when you were here, or afterwards by letter, since I did not have enough

1 A. Bellani, Testimony, July 1963, IMC Archives.

2 Sr. F. Giuseppina Tempo, Testimony, February 15, 1931, IMC Archives.

3 Letters, IV, 80.

4 Letters, IV, 610.

5 Letters, III, 647.

knowledge of the environment, so different and changing, in which you live [...]».⁶

I underline this aspect: our Founder has matured his own experience regarding the missionary method through the knowledge and experience of his missionaries on the spot. Here is the value of the manifold information he had asked and obtained. This, too, shows his mentality of a person with no preconceived ideas, but open to receive information from the cultural environment where his missionaries were operating.

From these reflections and the texts that I have reported, it seems to me that, more than a preoccupation for enculturation as such, in Allamano what emerges is a sense of respect for the people, for their environment and their history; and also an apostolic prudence and attention so as not to make Christianity hateful through initiatives which had not been well thought of. All this finds an explanation in the identity of our Founder, a delicate, respectful person, attentive not to cause any damage.

As a conclusion to this first point, I would say so: from Allamano we do not have clear and explicit indications regarding enculturation, generally speaking, and more so regarding that of the charisma. This does not mean that he is contrary to it, on the contrary. Keeping in mind his personality and the few elements which I have hinted at, I think we can assume that he is not against the process of enculturation. If then we want “to exaggerate”, we can even hold that, in the present situation, he would encourage it, because he wants that his sons and daughters may always be up to their vocation.

II. AN INTELLECTUAL PROCESS FOR THE ENCULTURATION OF THE CHARISMA

In this second point I speak of an “intellectual process”, that is of ideas, convictions and principles closely linked to the enculturation of the charisma which have been object of reflection for some time now.⁷ Let us immediately state that it is a real issue and not a new one. Already Paul VI, speaking to the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits, as if in order to reassure them, stated: «This difficulty which you are perceiving are those that today concern the Christians in general, facing the profound cultural change that affects even the meaning of God; yours are the same difficulties of contemporary apostles that today feel the preoccupation of announcing the Gospel the difficulty of translating it in a language that is received by modern men; They are the difficulties other religious Orders».⁸ Even though the Pope was speaking about the enculturation of the apostle, his words let be understood that there was an issue that was touching all the aspects of enculturation.

In order to make myself clear, I first make some definitions of the terms and then I shall list some ideas, on which those who treat this topic are generally in agreement. Viewed as a whole, these ideas should bring about a mentality and show how it is possible and dutiful to speak of enculturation of the charisma.

6 Letters, VI, 169-170.

7 For these reflections I am inspired by some studies that I consider valid regardless of their dates: ARIJ A. ROEST CROLLIUS s.j. *Enculturation of the foundational charisma, with special reference to the last General Congregations of the Company of Jesus*, in AA.VV., *How to read again today the foundational charisma*, Editrice Rogate, Roma 1995, 219-239; M. MIDALI, *Characteristics of a Founder*, *ibid.*, 31-90. A. ROMANO, *The Founders, prophecy of history*, Editrice Ancora, Milano 1989; G. FERRARI, *Challenges and questions of the today society and cultures to the prophetic dimension of the religious life*, in AA.VV., *Religious life: prophecy in contemporary society?*, Acts of the 69th Semester Assembly of the General Superiors, Rome 2007; R. COZZA, *Can a charisma be re-aculturated?*, “Testimoni”, 21/2008, 26-28.

8 ID. *o.c.*, 223-224.

1. DEFINITION OF TERMS

a. Charisma of foundation and charisma of Institute. When one speaks of “charisma of foundation” or “foundational charisma”, it is meant the charisma at the beginning, concretely the “charisma of the founder”, that is, that supernatural grace granted by the Spirit to a person in order of starting an Institute of evangelical life, as an answer to the socio-religious needs of the People of God of a place and of an epoch. Whereas the expression “charisma of Institute” generally means the same charisma of the founder in as much as it is expressed in history through the life and work of the disciples who prolong the original founding experience. When one speaks of “enculturation of the charisma” it is meant the “charisma of Institute”, though not detached from that of the founder.

b. Charisma of the founder and spirit of the founder. Premising that in popular literature “charisma” and “spirit” of the founder are used as synonyms, it is nevertheless well to keep in mind that they are two terms that express two distinct realities, though not separate, of one and the same experience of the Spirit. “Charisma”, in fact, mainly underlines the action of God, his call, whereas “spirit” rather underlines the action of the individual who answers the divine call. To say “charisma” evokes what the person has received as a “gift”, whereas to say “spirit” rather evokes what the person brings about actively cooperating with the invisible action of the Holy Spirit. When one speaks of “enculturation of the charisma”, it is not meant the enculturation of the supernatural gift in itself, but the effect of life and of apostolate that it has brought out all along the years.

c. Renewal and enculturation. There is the danger of confusing these two processes, that are themselves distinct but not separate. Enculturation is certainly an act of renewal, at least in a general sense, but not vice versa, because an Institute may need to renew itself even if it is duly enculturated. He who speaks of “actualization” of the charisma sometimes he intends renewal and sometimes intends enculturation.

2. TO BRING ABOUT A MENTALITY

Having made these clarifications of terminology, here are some ideas that can contribute to create a correct mentality, as well as some useful convictions on the big topic of the enculturation of the charisma.

a. “Foundation” event of enculturation. One idea that deserves to be underlined is the fact that the foundation itself of an Institute is in itself already an event of enculturation. In as much as it is an experience of the Spirit, the charisma lived by the founders and by their first disciples does not exist in a vacuum. It is an experience incarnated and expressed in typical cultural forms of the society and of the Church of their time. In fact, every founder lives and operates in a given cultural context and he expresses himself also when he defines the nature and the characteristics of his own Institute. Every Institute, therefore, when they are born they are enculturated, because they are born, they develop in a culture and, therefore, they belong to it. This is the enculturation called “original” or “primary”.

In the period following the foundation, such a charismatic experience dresses itself with various cultural forms that are influenced by the different places and times in which the followers of the founder have lived and operated. The outcome is that, when later on one speaks of enculturation of the charisma, as we are doing, what is meant is an enculturation which is “successive” or

“secondary”, which is not detached, but connected to the “original” one and that is to be kept present.

b. Approval of the Church. An Institute of evangelical life is recognized and approved by the legitimate authority of the Church. Such acknowledgement guarantees for the Institute itself, as well as for its foundational charisma that is at its origin, a whole of values held indispensable for the achievement of its goal. Since the mission of an Institute takes place in times and cultures that are manifold and different, and that keep changing with time, it implies that the Church intends to guarantee not only the beginning, but also the process of development of an Institute, as long as it remains faithful (active faithfulness) to the original inspiration. It is obvious that when a founder asks for the approval of the Church he does not intend a guarantee just for his time, but also for the future. When the Church approves, it does not intend to stop the life of an Institute, tying it to a time and a culture, but it wants to protect it, from the beginning and throughout its successive developments. From these premises it comes as a consequence that, since the Church guarantees the genuineness of the Institutes in all times and places, the enculturation of a charisma, that is inevitable, and more so dutiful, must be considered legitimate as long as it is approved. Since the charisma is subjected to the dynamics of enculturation, that is the need of inserting itself in the various cultures and of taking up in a critical way their forms and values, so that it may not end up mummified, the Church, through its approval, gives the “certainty” of its authenticity throughout the times. That is why, after the Council, the legitimate authority of the Church has requested the approval of the renewed Constitutions, establishing that they may not be modified without its approval. Consequently, enculturation yes, but not outside the walk of the Church.

c. Return to the sources. Among the renewal criteria that the Council has proposed to consecrated people, one is exactly the return to the sources, that is, to the founder and to the healthy tradition. This means that the charisma itself of the founder, the same one the healthy tradition has kept, brought forward and, therefore, also enculturated, is a value to which reference must be made and from which one must never depart. I see in this renewal criterion a veiled encouragement to continue the process of enculturation in a dynamic fidelity. A healthy tradition is also what is being brought about in the various cultural environments where today the subjects of an Institute live.

d. Enculturation as “process”. Enculturation, more than a theoretical “project” which is forced upon us in order to be realized, is rather a somehow spontaneous “process” that is taking place in reality. This means that when the subjects of an Institute live coherently their own consecration to Christ and to their own involvement in the mission, and they do so being fully integrated in their own cultural place, then enculturation takes place spontaneously. Enculturation of the charisma cannot be programmed, imposed, but just carried out. At least, it ought to be so, if the members of an Institute were coherent, open and not tied up to expressions of the past.

e. Guarantee of the common vocation. The Council decree “Ad Gentes”, where it deals with the Missionary Institutes, it affirms that: «Exactly because the missionary work itself, as confirmed by experience, cannot be accomplished by individual persons, a common vocation has gathered them in Institutes [...]»⁹. Besides, from the theology of the charisma, we know that the grace of foundation (charisma) is granted by the Holy Spirit to a founder not for his personal gain, but so that it be transmitted to the disciples of his time and of the future. As a consequence, every subject of an Institute of evangelical life is called by the Spirit to live that grace (charisma) that had been granted to the founder, transmitted by him to his disciples and by them lived through the time; but

9 AG, n. 27.

he is called upon to live this grace not by himself, but together with the other co-disciples called by the same Spirit for the same reasons and the same ideal. The grace of the common vocation gives to every subject of an Institute a “right” regarding the charisma: to understand it, to live it, to preserve it, to develop it and, afterwards, to enculturate it. All the members of an Institute, when they live coherently, are suitable in the same way for interpreting and enculturating the charisma. There are no people more suitable than others!

f. Which elements of the charisma can be enculturated? This is a concrete question. If the charisma is a grace of the Spirit, given to the Founder and through him to his disciples, it is evident that grace itself, being a supernatural reality, is not subjected to enculturation. What is enculturated, therefore, will be the way we interpret and live this grace, that is, the ways we respond to the vocation that can certainly change in different times and places.

Let me simplify, remaining in our own house. How could I possibly express in a synthetic way the contents of our charisma? I would say in this way: the contents of our charisma is “mission ad gentes in holiness of life”, lived and realized according to the spirit and the characteristic indicated to us by Allamano. I am not going to discuss this affirmation, even though there are many things that could be said. After all, it fully corresponds to what is said in our Constitution, art. 5. I have simplified only in order to make myself clear: this element of the charisma (mission ad gentes in holiness of life), in itself, cannot be enculturated. It is valid for all Consolata Missionaries, regardless the cultures they belong to. What is to be enculturated (also developed, renewed, etc.) is the way mission is carried out, it is our understanding of the ad gentes, and also our way of living in holiness. Without forgetting that our Founder has proposed to us not only this essential element, but also the way of bringing it about (I refer to our “characteristics” as reported in our Constitution, art. 11-16).

Turning again to our general topic, let us keep in mind, anyway, that some elements that are part of the charisma (think about the religious vows) are regulated by the canonical norm, and therefore they have a certain stability and equality at the level of the whole Church. Besides, let us keep in mind that not only all the elements of the cultures are valid to be received by the charisma. Some are even negative and ought to be abandoned. Our present consumerism, if it were already part of our western culture, should it be accepted? Culture does not have the final saying on everything. It is the wisdom of the members of an Institute that helps to find the way out of this complicated field. Christianity, which also has a great need of enculturation, expects to “purify” cultures when this is needed. In practice, this operation of distinguishing which elements of the charisma cannot be conditioned by a culture is very complex and difficult. It often brings about clashes in the Institutes.

g. To avoid the synthesis of the enculturation. There is still one more idea to be underlined in order to improve the true enculturation of the charisma. Imagining that an Institute be formed by members belonging to different cultures and accepting as valid the premise that all members have the right of interpreting and living an enculturated charisma, a curious question arises: how many types of enculturated charisma will be present in the same Institute? How many are the cultures of the subjects that make it up? To say “how many” is not simple, but one thing appears to be certain: it is not possible to make a synthesis of the cultures so that there may be one enculturated charisma for all its members, that is, that it may include elements from all other cultures. It would be a hybrid!

Consequently, a pluralism of ways of enculturating the same charisma may co-exist in one and the same Institute. This is an open, delicate field, having the possibility of great developments. Taking off from this idea, some people say that it would be better to have Institutes divided up in Provinces and that all their members may experience the same charisma, but in their own cultural environment, with other subjects coming from the same culture.

III. USEFUL ATTITUDES FOR THE PROCESS OF ENCULTURATION

If the process of enculturation is necessary, besides being inevitable and spontaneous, there is a need for the Institutes to promote attitudes that will favor it so that it may be brought about in an ordered and useful way. I'll try to speak of some that seem to be important and concrete, as shown by experience.

a. *An attitude of respect and mutual liking.* The first one, which is almost a premise, is the attitude of favor, I would say of liking, for this process that is taking place. It would be a mistake to close oneself in his own "environment" (so as not to say "provincialism") and expect that the others, from whatever part they come, they had to adapt. Obviously, Obviously, this is so for all cultures, even for the original one that, whether one likes it or not, has influenced most the setting up and organization of the Institute. We think well, this is "respect" for the other and his values.

b. *To allow time for the development of the process.* If enculturation takes place with a certain spontaneity we must avoid to put pressure on the process. It would be a mistake to make a "program of enculturation of the charisma" in concrete things and force everybody to carry it out, also by imposing some time tables. We must enlighten people on this topic, but not to program, because it would almost be an imposition. The outcome would be a fake. It is the coherent life of the members of a culture that carries out enculturation, perhaps without even noticing it. As long as there are no preconceived barriers.

c. *In tight communion with the Founder and the Institute.* It is the charisma transmitted by the founder that must be enculturated. That is why I underline the importance for all members of an Institute (and not just a few specialized people) to know well the Founder (person, environment, thought, spirit, etc.). Theoretical knowledge is not enough; it is not enough to know and repeat some of his famous phrases; what is needed is appreciation and love for the Founder, and therefore there is interest and guarantee of fidelity. Turning to ourselves, in our Institute the books on Allamano and the Institute are quite many. He who does not know (or has a little, superficial knowledge of) the Founder, he does not appreciate and love him and our reality, he is not qualified to enculturate the charisma. The same goes for the person who lives by himself and is not interested in the happenings of his own Institute.

d. *To avoid reciprocal oppositions.* Since the original culture (for us it is the Italian/Piedmont), at least in the beginning, has prevailed sufficiently (not to say much), the self-defenses of some individuals coming from other cultural areas are quite understandable. Then there is the possibility that the risk of oppositions, self-defenses, rejections may take place; "cultural colonialism", "undue impositions" etc. are evoked. If we want that enculturation of the charisma may progress and it may not become a cause for divisions, we must avoid polemics. To know history, but without remaining scandalized by it

e. *Connected fatigues.* It would be useless to hide to each other the fact that enculturation of the charisma is not without a price which must be paid. Even if every person lives his own culture, it is a fact that the Institute has its own unity to be preserved and its members must confront themselves with this many times. Think of the General Chapters, the Regional Conferences, the Councils,

questionnaires, meetings of all kinds, etc. The outcome is that, in order to avoid reciprocal oppositions, wise people accept diversity without contesting it, though they may suffer for it. Sometimes they prefer to return to their original environment, just to avoid having to subject themselves to the demands of other cultures, which they consider to be heavy. If this happens in all the Institutes, imagine how strong is its incidence in those of a missionary character where there is the prevalence of unity and the sending of everybody to every place, on top of that, being all mixed together.

f. Unending process. Still one more aspect. History teaches that enculturation is not a process that is done once for all. It is rather a continuous walk because cultures move on, change, integrate each other, etc. Then, here there is a conviction that should accompany us: to be open to enculturation, but not to think of accomplishing everything during our lifetime. Our successors will have a different mentality, as it is usually said, and they will experience their own cultural forms that probably will not coincide in everything with ours. Certainly they, too, will try to be coherent and faithful to the charisma, and they too will try to enculturate it in their own culture.

Conclusion.

I have proposed many observations, organizing them the best I could. Only by seeing them as a whole, I think, one can find in them a help in promoting a wise enculturation of the charisma. At least, I hope so.

We ought to recognize that the process of enculturation has always been closely connected to the life and development of the Institutes of consecrated life. If, for instance, we consider those of ancient foundation (especially the big religious Orders) we notice in them evident signs of enculturation, both because they have developed in manifold cultures and also because they have existed for centuries, with their cultural expressions.

Today, this process seems to be more urgent than in past years. Perhaps because a greater rationalization is being carried out (it is studied and spoken about more); perhaps also because of the globalization which is taking place at all levels. As a matter of fact, we all have a greater awareness that we cannot ignore or escape this process.

With sincerity and realism, nevertheless, we must also admit that, even though the doctrine on enculturation of the charisma is shaping up, that is, there are many studies and statements of a certain level, it is the praxis that is problematic. When it is a matter of establishing which elements are more subjected to the process of enculturation, the issue gets complicated and it is difficult to reach an agreement. Let us admit that enculturation is complex and let us entrust ourselves to hope even on this point.

We, Consolata Missionary Fathers, Brothers and Sisters are aware of all this and we wish to be those guiding the process of enculturation of our charisma, the best we can, through the help of our Founder, the Blessed Joseph Allamano, whom we feel present and alive in our missionary families.