

# 6. Inculturation and Synodality

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## Theological Briefing Papers for the Synod 2023

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### Summary

The official documents mention inculturation infrequently. For example, the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* mentions inculturation two times (no. 54, 92), and the *Instrumentum Laboris* three times (no. 60, Introduction, B 2.1).

In the academic literature too, the topic is not mentioned often, with 16 materials discussing the subject in some depth. These articles and chapters link key features of synodality such as encountering and listening with inculturation.

Three interpretations of inculturation come to the fore. 1) Theologically speaking, God incarnated within a specific human culture; this provides the theological template for our inculturation within (new) cultures. 2) From a missionary perspective, inculturation means a synodal attitude of openness for and communion with the “other,” with a readiness to adaptation. 3) In a more general ecclesial sense, walking together on a synodal path implies a “healthy decentralization” in order to allow for unique inculturated and decolonial expressions of catholicity in particular Churches.

### Detailed Analysis

#### Statistics

- The word *incult\** features 718 times. Although 25% of the documents (160 out of 651) refer to inculturation, most of these documents (85%) have 5 references or less. There are 16 documents with more than 10 references to the term.

- Most of the top 16 contributions (most of which are treated below) has been written by authors who work in Latin America, come from Latin America, or deal with Latin American themes (Borras, Galli, Luciani, Martínez-Saavedra, Noceti, Weiler).

## 1) Theological Foundations of Inculturation

- The incarnation of Jesus Christ and the inculturation of the early Church within its Greco-Roman context, is a template for modern-day inculturation (Galli, Martínez-Saavedra). The Second Vatican Council recognized this, articulating the need to “adapt the Gospel” in order for the Church to achieve its missionary purpose (*Gaudium et Spes* 44) (Luciani 2020b).
- Martínez-Saavedra compares the Tower of Babel and Pentecost and suggests that the unity lost at the Tower of Babel is not recovered via a return to uniformity, but rather via the diversity of languages experienced at Pentecost.

## 2) Criteria of Inculturation

- Missionary encounters require an attitude of openness and imply mutual transformation. This openness is rooted in the Christian experience of God’s mercy and enables the Church to approach the extra-ecclesial “other” from a position of humility (Eckholt).
- From within this humility, evangelization is not merely the task of “bringing the Gospel” *towards* the other but is primarily a “walking according to the Gospel” *with* the other (Odinet). Rather than a unilateral acculturation of one culture *towards* the Gospel—which implies an unequal relationship—inculturation should be the incarnation of the Gospel from *within* a culture (Martínez-Saavedra, cf. Luciani and Weiler).
- Following the doctrine of the option for the poor, successful inculturation is marked by the flourishing of the poor (Odinet). Women are also a litmus test for inculturation, as their exclusion from Church structures both prevents the Church from identifying with modern society and prevents proclamation of the Gospel from a female perspective (Heller, also Weiler).
- Inculturation is something demanded of the Church even in majority catholic contexts; inculturation never stops (Eckholt).

### 3) Inculturation, Decentralization, and De-Colonisation

- A key theme—and tension—is the relationship between the authority of local Churches and the universal Church. Eckholt argues that there must be a healthy permission of plurality within the Church to allow for inculturation—and thereby allow for evangelization—to function (Eckholt). Much of the literature concerning inculturation refers to the recent Synod on the Amazon (Galli, Martínez-Saavedra, Luciani 2020a, Luciani 2020b, Noceti, Weiler). According to Luciani, the Synod on the Amazon emerges as a prime example of both attention to the challenges of a particular Church, and of an attempt to develop a more dynamic relationship within Church hierarchy (cf. the other authors).
- Some authors contrast inculturation with the colonial heritage and neo-colonialism in the form of absolutizing Western culture (Luciani 2020a, 2020b, Noceti, with some elaboration in Weiler). For example, Luciani notes that synodality requires a “cultural conversion which proposes decolonial inculturation processes” (Luciani 2020a) and Weiler testifies that indigenous people living in the Amazon feel they are not at home in the Church, but feel themselves to be guests.

## Materials: Major Recommended Readings

**Borras**, Alphonse, “La Conférence ecclésiale de l’Amazonie: une institution synodale inédite,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 97 (2021): 223-292, <https://doi.org/10.2143/etl.97.2.3289258>.

**Eckholt**, Margit, “Pluralität, Synodalität und Barmherzigkeit: eine fundamentaltheologische Reflexion in interkultureller Perspektive,” in *Apologie und Glaubensrechenchaft zwischen Konfrontation und Korrelation. Überlegungen zur Struktur gegenwärtiger Fundamentaltheologie*, ed. by Bernd Elmar Koziel (Echt: Echter Verlag, 2017), 203-227.

**Galli**, Carlos M., “Constitución de la Conferencia Eclesial de la Amazonía. Fundamentos históricos, teológicos, culturales y pastorales,” *Medellín. Teología y pastoral para América Latina y el Caribe* 46 (2020): 517-542.

**Heller**, Karin, “‘Steht oder fällt’ die weltweite Synodale Kirche mit der Frauenfrage?,” in *Synodalisierung. Eine Zerreißprobe für die katholische Weltkirche? Expertinnen und Experten aus aller Welt beziehen Stellung*, ed. by Paul Zulehner and others (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2022), 177-190.

**Luciani**, Rafael, “‘Querida Amazonia.’ La emergencia de una hermenéutica genético-inductiva y la inculturación teológico-cultural de la doctrina,” *Razón y Fe* 282 (2020): 41-55.

———, “Reconfigurar la identidad y la estructura eclesial a la luz de las Iglesias locales. ‘Querida Amazonia’ y el estatuto teológico de las realidades socioculturales,” *Medellín. Teología y pastoral para América Latina y el Caribe* 46 (2020): 487-515.

- Martínez-Saavedra**, Luis, “Nouveaux chemins pour l’inculturation de l’Évangile,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 105 (2021): 60-73.
- Noceti**, Serena, “El sínodo para la Amazonía y la reflexión sobre los ministerios que «hacen Iglesia»,” in *La sinodalidad en la vida de la Iglesia: Reflexiones para contribuir a la reforma eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and María del Pilar Silveira (Madrid: San Pablo, 2020), 343-373.
- Odinot**, François, “Synodalité et inculturation,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 144 (2022): 232-246.
- Weiler**, Birgit, “Synodalität kultivieren: im Leben und Struktur der Kirche von Amazonien wie der Weltkirche,” in *Laboratorium Weltkirche. Die Amazonien-Synode und ihre Potenziale*, ed. by Judith Gruber and others (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2022), 49-65.