Communicating “revelation-faith” with culture in mind

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When one considers the four pivotal documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1963) – Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, Sacrosanctum Concilium and Dei Verbum (O’Malley, 67:1, 2006) it is possible to regard Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, as the most important.

While popularly known for its statements on scripture (Witherup, 2006), the document speaks in its first six articles of a more basic reality. It is a truth underlying the Bible itself: the relationship between God and people, technically articulated as “revelation” (God’s life-giving initiative and action) and “faith” (the lived human response). Because this relationship (revelation-faith) is foundational, the way it is interpreted has an impact on the manner we regard who Jesus Christ is (Christology), what the Church and its mission are (Ecclesiology), what the purpose of life is (Eschatology), how we are to follow Jesus (Spirituality), and how we make decisions in accord with our life of faith (Christian Ethics).

Needless to say, “revelation-faith” is crucial in our understanding and communication of the Christian faith as well as in the study of theology in general. But how are we to understand “revelation-faith”? If we want to really communicate this reality or any theological reality for that matter, I suggest that we consider the role that culture plays in understanding reality, including the theological: “All human beings are cultural beings. Jesus must be culturally relevant if he is really to be understood and appreciated. This is a most obvious fact unfortunately only too often ignored” (Luzbetak, 1988: 374).

Culture and inculturation in communicating the Gospel

Since the Second Vatican Council, which was held from 1962 to 1965 (Abbott, 1966), the importance of culture and inculturation in communicating the Gospel have been emphasized. Profiting from the major shift in the understanding of culture from “classical” to “empirical,” (Lonergan, 1972), the Council indicated a number of significant points regarding culture. Firstly, culture is the way people become authentically and fully human (Gaudium et Spes, 53). Secondly, that God communicates through human culture (Gaudium et Spes, 58). And thirdly, inculturation is utilized as constituting a general perspective to summarize the history of evangelization:

“Living in various circumstances during the course of time, the Church, too, has used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it, and to give it better expression in liturgical celebrations and in the life of the diversified community of the faithful” (Gaudium et Spes, 58).

Picking up from where the Council left, as it were, Paul VI, who considers the evangelization of cultures of prime importance, thinks that: “Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life” (Evangeli
Nuntiandi, 63). And John Paul II underscores this point by saying that faith must become culture if it is to be real (quoted in Shorter, 2005, 1)

Utilizing such a cultural perspective in the communication of the Gospel is warranted. People spontaneously express themselves through their culture, a collective tradition of experiences and manner of living which becomes second-nature to them. It is through this dynamic and integrated system of feeling, thinking and behaving that they instinctively tend to make sense of any given reality. This insight is not new. The Scholastics already recognized the power of such inclination in their dictum “quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur,” whatever is perceived is perceived by the mode of perception of the perceiver. Culture is, as a whole, their shared model of interpretation for life.

A people’s culture embodies and communicates singular beliefs, values, and ways of doing things (Hall, 1959). That is why it is important to take seriously into account the culture of a people in communicating the realities of faith to them. And this has not escaped the notice of the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, Ad Gentes. Without reducing culture to this dimension of it, the decree rightly speaks of the Church utilizing the way of life of people to enhance their faith and their grasp of it: “From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these Churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Savior’s grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life” (Ad Gentes, 22; cf. Gaudium et Spes, 44).

Meaningfulness to the culture and fidelity to the Gospel

The expediency of employing the culture to interpret the faith in a relevant manner dovetails with what, I think, is the first condition for doing theology that is faithful to the Tradition and expressed communicatively. This is its rootedness in the cultural experience of people. The language of theology, in order to be meaningful, has to have a recognizable reference to their actual way of life. The relevance-seeking character of doing theology has, as it were, chronological priority. Its consideration is prior to the question of its truthfulness. For however “true” or coherent any existing theology is, it is likely to be ignored if it does not make any sense in people’s lives.

It is not enough that the language utilized purports to relate to the experiences of people; it must be a way of speaking which truly resonates with their experiences and, is therefore, experientially recognizable. Theological language only communicates meaning when it expresses experiences shared by the community. Such is the role of culture. It is a people’s common language that embodies and expresses their collective experiences.¹

Clearly, the consideration and utilization of culture is vital in theoretically understanding “revelation-faith.” But theological reflection requires an attentiveness and fidelity to matters theological too. Otherwise, our theology may only be masquerading as theology, whereas in truth it is but a cultural reflection with some superficial and ambiguous link with the Gospel. Theology does not only have to square with the demands of meaning, but also of truth. Legitimate attention to relevance, after all, does not dispense with fidelity to the Tradition. The Gospel, though only truly comprehensible and expressible through culture, is not a creation of any culture.

Doing theology with culture in mind: Principle and approach

So how does one precisely combine the imperative arising from cultural meaningfulness with the demand coming from fidelity to the Gospel? To pose the question in another way, how can diversity in theology be combined with unity of faith? First, a general consideration about
a basic principle in doing theology. There are two poles in doing theology: the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and human experience. Both poles are essential and constitutive in articulating any understanding of the faith. Together they suggest the need of any given theology to be rooted in the culture and to be faithful to the Tradition. In this principle the two poles interact mutually with each other: the Tradition throws light on human experience as human experience sheds light on the Tradition.

In doing theology we grasp the meaning of the Tradition precisely through the lens of human experience and we comprehend our human experience from the vantage point of view of the Tradition. It is important, to my mind, to insist on the mutual interaction of the two poles in order to avoid the imposition of the Tradition understood in a particular cultural way on the pole of experience, as well to as prevent the pole of cultural experience from merely using the Tradition to legitimate its perspective.

Based on the general principle of theologizing discussed above, we now consider a specific approach to it. This approach takes into account rootedness in the cultural context and faithfulness to the Tradition in a situation of pluralism both in the present-day context and in the Tradition. The diversity of cultures is an accepted fact in our times. And pluriformity is so much part of our Tradition that one may even argue for its being characteristic of our theology. Yet for all the differences that are present, there is unanimity in the claim that it is the one and the same faith. The one recognizable Tradition is shown to be dynamic through a diversity of expressions. From this perspective neither mere uniformity nor sheer diversity can be the measure of theological truth. What holds unity and diversity together in relation to truth, I think, are the existence of theological constants in the Tradition, especially those found in scripture.

The approach I am proposing here is the utilization of theological constants in different cultural contexts. These so-called constants are the underlying interrelated theological elements always found in the differing expressions of the faith because they are deemed essential. They are the common themes present and discerned in different theological expressions. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that these constants are never discovered apart from their cultural expression. They keep recurring in the many different local formulations of faith, whether the recurrence is expressed at different historical periods in one locality or, more or less at the same time, in different contemporaneous communities.

As a term, constants suggest both steadiness and adaptability, resoluteness and flexibility, commonality and differentiation as exemplified in the very same faith in Jesus Christ but with truly different historical and cultural expressions. They point to the truth yet allow that truth to be understood and expressed contextually. They assure continuity even in what appears (to some) as “discontinuous” historical and cultural formulations. They make possible a theological unity without rigid theological uniformity. They thus serve as indicators of harmony with the Tradition of particular local theologies, but they do so in a manner suitable to specific cultural contexts.

Functions of theological constants
Constants are discovered as constants post factum rather than a priori. The category of constants requires the test of time before it can be useful. Constants already presume a de facto situation of pluriformity in faith expressions, unlike sameness which presupposes a condition of uniformity. We may even say that the development of contextual theological reflection has made the discovery of constants imperative. In this sense, constants have often been associated with the means to gauge the faithfulness of a given theological construct to the Tradition.
As we shall see, however, this is not the only role it plays in theological reflection. Constants can also guide a new cultural interpretation of the faith. They can serve as reference points in formulating a theology. Constants so discerned appear to have two related functions: (1) They can assist in evaluating the truthfulness of a theology, and (2) they can also serve as guide in articulation a fresh interpretation of the Gospel. Together as interrelated elements, constants will serve as continuing indispensable reference points which we can consult and ground our doing of theology. It can easily happen that as we assess our theology with the use of constants, we are at the same time articulating a new one by structuring it according to them. I shall illustrate this later.

Without minimizing social relevance and the cultural meaningfulness of faith expressions, constants may be looked upon as bases of and sign posts for inculturated or contextualized theological reflections which are rooted and faithful to the Judaeo-Christian Tradition. They also enable cross-historical and cross-cultural comparisons thereby serving as reminders as to which aspects of the faith (as represented by particular constants) need to be attended to in a new formulation by a local community. It may well be that a set of constants discovered in one local church may alert other local churches to certain aspects of the faith which they have not quite paid attention to but recognize as essential.

After all, every inculturation of the Gospel tends to bring certain aspects of it to the foreground, while other ones are relegated to the background. This implies that use of constants in gauging the truthfulness of a given theological reflection requires dialogue with other communities of faith, whether of the past or of the present. Openness and willingness to learn is an imperative within this framework and procedure because constants are precisely discovered in a communally-oriented theologizing.

Discerning constants in revelation-faith
With the intent of discovering and employing theological constants in revelation-faith, we will first analyze three different examples of how this has been culturally understood and articulated (and, therefore, communicated), namely, the Jewish, the neo-scholastic, and the personalist interpretations of it. After this, I shall provide an example of how the discerned constants can serve as a guide in formulating an inculturated theology of revelation-faith in another cultural context, namely, the Filipino. I realize that any cultural articulation of revelation-faith has limitations. After all, culture is not perfect and has negative aspects. This, however, will not be dealt with in this article so as not to lose the focus I have chosen, namely, to illustrate the possibility of using theological constants in inculturating revelation-faith.

The Biblical cultural interpretation of revelation-faith in Dei Verbum
In articles 1-6 of the document Dei Verbum, Vatican II articulates the biblical view of revelation-faith through the Jewish cultural metaphor of dabar (word) spoken by God and heard and proclaimed by believers (art. 1, 4, 5). Understood as an active word or eloquent deed (art. 2), dabar, a relational imagery rather than an ontological concept, is God’s Self-initiated action (art. 2) that offers “eternal life” and implies fellowship with one another rooted in the Father and in Jesus Christ (art. 1).

Following the logic of the metaphor, revelation is “God speaking” His/Her word and faith “people hearing and proclaiming” God’s word (art. 1, 5). Based on the Jewish understanding of dabar, revelation is the effective offer of life in its fullness and a disclosure of who God is in relation to us (art. 2-4). The Word of God as divine action in “history” (art. 2) is both salvific
and revelatory. The response to this Word is an “obedience of faith,” whereby people hear this Word by “entrusting their whole selves freely to God” (art. 5).  

The neo-scholastic philosophical interpretation of revelation-faith
The Enlightenment and the consequent development of empirical sciences led not only to the recognition of the potential of the rational, but also its glorification. The philosophies of rationalism and immanentism proved and legitimated human confidence in the capacity of the human mind to understand the dynamics of nature, the causes and effects in our natural world. This is what genuine scientia is all about.  

This development undermined the authority of Church and religion which, till then, had been depended upon to provide explanations for what happens in the nature. Even God began to be construed naturally as merely a popular and symbolic expression of human rational knowledge of relationship with the Almighty. True knowledge, which the Church claimed to dispense, was strongly questioned. In response to this challenge and threat, the Church developed a theology based on scholasticism, but did so in an overly intellectualistic fashion.  

Over and against the nature, the super-nature (above or beyond the natural) was posited in what evolved as neo-scholastic theology. Culturally speaking, ratio (reason, mind) as what constituted human beings as distinct from animals was taken for granted by both the Church and the “scientists”. It was also assumed that true knowledge, which brought human fulfilment, was the goal of the ratio. But while these “scientists” might have claimed true knowledge in the sphere of the nature, so went the argument in Catholic neo-scholasticism, what was beyond it, and was ultimately necessary for human salvation, was inaccessible to the powers of the ratio. God and the true, salvific knowledge that can only come from God belonged in the realm of the super-nature. Supernatural truths, then, which were undiscoverable by reason, could only be known by God revealing them Himself. The fullness of this revelation happens in Jesus Christ. So, in faith, human beings must give their intellectual assent to the supernatural truths revealed by God in order to be saved.  

The personalist philosophical interpretation of revelation-faith
Responding to the challenges of perceived objectification of the human person and the impersonal character of relationships found in modern industrial society, personalist philosophy ("Personalism"; O’Collins & Farrugia, 2000: 199) paid close attention to the questions of the value of the human person and intersubjectivity. The human being is a subject, a person, not an object; but the human being is also a subject intended to relate to other subjects. Within the framework of intersubjectivity, a person is a person in personal encounters or relationships. This particular thematization of the human and (intimate) human relationships is singularly illustrated in the work of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, in his I and Thou (Buber, M., 1958).  

Assuming the same concerns, personalist theology harnesses the categories developed in the philosophical discourse to communicate revelation-faith to a society struggling with the increasing objectification of human beings and consequent weakening of genuine human relationships as persons. In this context the God-human relationship is seen in terms of intersubjectivity, where each subject in the relationship communicates the self totally to the other. “Self-communication” is a complete giving of oneself to the other in trust which takes place in genuine human encounters. The “totally Other,” taking the initiative, communicates the GodSelf to the human “other.” In turn, as a response, human beings give themselves fully
to God. The result of this mutual total self-giving is communion. In an authentic relationship there is, to use another expression, a *traditio personae*.

**The discerned theological constants in revelation-faith theologies**

Going over the three cultural interpretations of revelation-faith presented above and inquiring after what might be similar elements that undergird all of them, I suggest the following: (1) Something is going on between God and people, however this is seen; (2) God’s action; (3) human response; (4) the experienced effect of God’s action in the context of faith; and (5) the specified setting of the action both divine and human.

For the biblical world the (1) relationship between God and people is seen in terms of a dynamic conversation. (2) God’s action is viewed as “speaking,” while (3) human response is understood in terms of “hearing.” (4) The experienced effect of God’s action is “eternal life” leading to fellowship with God and with one another. (5) This “conversation” that brings about “eternal life” and “fellowship” happens in “the history” of salvation.

In the neo-scholastic theology of revelation-faith, (1) God reveals knowledge while people assent to it. In the context of the attainment of knowledge of the *natura* by the then newly developed sciences, (2) God reveals *supernatural* knowledge (truths) inaccessible to the human *ratio*. (3) People, in faith, give their intellectual assent to these truths that God reveals, especially in Jesus Christ. (4) Saving knowledge for people is what results from God’s revelation and from people’s assent to the truths. (5) The event of revelation-faith is in the realm of the *supernatural*.

As far as the personalist interpretation of revelation-faith goes, (1) an intersubjective or personal relationship between God and persons / people (2) begins through God’s self-communication. (3) Persons, in response, give themselves totally and freely to God. (4) An intimate communion of selves happens: the GodSelf and the personal self of human beings. (5) Such relationship occurs in personal, intersubjective encounters or genuine personal dialogue.

**Reinterpretation of revelation-faith in the Filipino culture**

From the above examples of cultural interpretation of revelation-faith in the biblical, the neo-scholastic and personalist contexts, I had hoped to illustrate how theological constants make possible different relevant perspectives on revelation-faith while at the same time ensuring fidelity to the Tradition. The examples had aimed at giving a glimpse of what unity in diversity could mean in theologizing. They illustrate how constants function as a gauge of faithfulness to the Gospel. But constants discerned also serve as a guide for fresh cultural interpretations of the same reality of revelation-faith in other contexts. It is to this function that we now turn our attention by looking into the Filipino situation.

In the late 1970s to the early 1980s, the question of God’s will became acute situationally and culturally. Situationally, the country was faced with massive structural poverty (it still is!) and widespread violation of human rights under the martial law regime. Can such vicious and widespread suffering arising from people’s inhumanity towards one another be willed by God? Culturally, there is the widespread popular belief that everything that happens, whether beneficial or destructive, happens because God wills it. What really was God’s will?

Even more fundamental was another question, what kind of God do Christians believe in? In my search for answers to these questions I saw how God’s will and God’s character (nature) were, within the culture itself, twin questions, intimately intertwined. Gaining this insight was not possible without the specifically cultural dimension in the investigation of the issue.
The most important and most frequently used Filipino concept and word for “will” is *loob* (literally, inside or the within; broadly and metaphorically, the inner self). Already in 1593, the first translation of the Lord’s Prayer had utilized the term “loob” for “will” in the petition, “Your will be done.” To be of “bad will” is, according to the culture, to have *masamang* (bad) *loob*. Conversely, to will what is good is to manifest *kagandahang-loob* (literally, a beautiful within or inner self).

The notion of *kagandahang-loob* comes from two concepts: *loob* and *ganda*. *Loob*, literally meaning “the within,” refers to the core of one’s personhood and the most authentic inner self of the Filipino which is essentially related to other selves. *Loob*, you might say, is the “shared self” of the Filipino. It is, moreover, regarded as the organizing centre of human reality and the wellspring of feeling, thought and behaviour. *Loob*, as someone who synthesized the many studies on the subject in the Philippines has shown, has many related concepts as well (Alejo, 1990). *Ganda* is literally “beauty” with a touch of charm or winsomeness. The culture knows of beauty that is superficial and even deceptive. But in the notion of *kagandahang-loob* it denotes a beauty which wells up from within the real self and that which is not only ethically good, but winsomely good as well. Perhaps, for Filipinos, *kagandahang-loob* is primarily “pure positivity” (Schillebeeckx) that captivates and wins people over. Surely, this is a reminder for us of someone who “went around doing good” (Acts 10:38). It refers to a goodness that is not cold, but warm; a kindness which is not enslaving, but liberating.

So what is God’s *loob*? This discovery would lead me further into the inner sanctum of the culture. The essentially relational concept, *kagandahang-loob*, while obviously referring to kindheartedness, benevolence, beneficence, goodness (as a specific act), the term *loob*, when looked into more profoundly, yields a meaning equivalent to “nature,” the quality not just of a relationship, but the quality of one’s personhood, albeit within a relational way of thinking. *Kagandahang-loob* then is not merely a positive act in relating to others; it is also a description of who the person truly is.

In ordinary life Filipinos talk about communicating such goodness in terms of making the other person(s) *experience* such goodness rather than just *showing* it. *Pagpapadama* (making the other person experience) is more profound and meaningful in relationships among Filipinos than *pagpapakita* (showing in the sense of making visible). In intimately communicating one’s genuine love for another, we would use the term *pagpapadama* to ensure the palpable presence of that affection. Following this cultural manner of thinking, revelation as God’s action can be articulated as *pagpapadama ng Diyos ng Kanyang kagandahang-loob*: God making us experience His / Her most authentic, winsome, beneficent, relational Self.

This realization that *loob* is our most authentic relational inner self where our true worth lies led me to conceive faith as the interiorization of this divine *loob*. “To become like God” in our *loob*, in our true selves is what it means to have faith. And I am reminded in connection to this of the notion of “divinization” in Eastern theological thought. Consequently, I paid greater attention to God’s *kagandahang-loob* in the petition in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your will (*loob*) be done.” This is not merely a matter of obeying what God wants in a definite situation. More than that it is the interiorization of who God is; making God’s *kagandahang-loob* as my *loob*. But does this not simply express in another cultural way the very exhortation of Jesus to “be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect” and “to be merciful as the Father is merciful”?

This *pagpapadama ng Diyos ng Kanyang kagandahang-loob* (God making us experience His/Her most authentic, winsome, beneficent, relational Self) and *pagsasaloob ng*...
kagandahang-loob ng Diyos (the making part of my loob God’s kagandahang-loob) express in Filipino cultural categories “revelation” and “faith” that happens in ordinary life. The experienced effect of this relationship, a communion of the most authentic relational selves of God and people, is “ginhawa,” that is, overall sense of well-being.

The constants of revelation-faith in the Filipino cultural context are thus to be described as follows: (1) The relationship between God and people is regarded as a sharing of the loob, that of God’s and that of a person or people. (2) God as kagandahang-loob makes Himself/Herself experienced (pagpapadama) by people. This is revelation. (3) The response of faith is the interiorization (pagsasaloob) or making part of one’s loob the kagandahang-loob of God. (4) Persons or people who have experienced God’s kagandahang-loob and have interiorized this experience ginhawa, a genuine overall sense of well-being effected by God. (5) For Filipinos this relationship between true selves (loob) occurs in the ordinary situations of life.

The ultimate aim of this presentation has been to propose a methodology of communicating the foundational reality of revelation-faith in a culturally meaningful way. For this to happen within theological education, I am of the conviction that it must be done with culture in mind. But because it is also necessary to attend to the question of truth in theologizing, I proposed the discernment and use of theological constants to ensure its fidelity to the Judaeo-Christian Tradition.

Notes
1. Since culture is really a people’s distinctive tradition of experiences, I use the terms “culture” and “experience” interchangeably.
2. As practitioners of contextual theology are quick to remind us, the core of the Gospel message in relation to its specific cultural formulation is not one of the kernel and its husk. It is much more like the layers of the onion to the onion itself. Peeling away each layer will not bring us to the core of the onion, but to disappearance of the onion itself (Cf. Bevans, S.B., 1992:33-36).
3. This concept of “constants” can be seen, for example, in Dunn, J.D.G., 1990:11-32; Paul VI, 1976:art 26; Schillebeeckx, E., 1981:51-55; Schillebeeckx, E., 1983:638-644; and Bevans, S. B. and Schroeder, R.P., 2004).
4. I am utilizing here the biblical interpretation found in Dei Verbum, art. 1-6.
5. I am aware that what has happened in Dei Verbum is a personalist interpretation of the biblical data (see section “c” of the paper below). In a recent commentary it is stated that “Dei Verbum…uses a different way of expressing this doctrine [of revelation]. The constitution expresses a personalist view of revelation. Rather than using the static and philosophical language of earlier church declarations, Dei Verbum speaks in more personal tones influenced by biblical concepts. The council fathers clearly rejected a traditional prepositional view of revelation, whereby the emphasis is given to the set of dogmas and doctrines that constitute authentic ‘church teaching.’ Instead, the document emphasizes revelation as an act of a trinitarian God whose very nature is self-giving. God’s self-revelation initiates a dialogue between God and humankind. God invites people into relationship, and we are asked to respond. God speaks to us as ‘friends’; we are ‘to share in the divine nature’ (DV2).” (Witherup, R.D., 2006:45).
6. A major obstacle in theologizing with culture in mind in the Philippines arises from the fact that English is the lingua franca of official Church communication, theology and theological education, and religious education or catechesis in the country.
7. Filipinos use the term “ganda” (beautiful) in their greetings: “Magandang umaga,” “magandang hapon,” “magandang gabi,” respectively meaning “good morning,” “good afternoon,” “good evening.”

Bibliography
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