

INCULTURATION AND THE ASHRAM IDEAL IN INDIA

V.F. Vineeth

Introduction

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards there was a strong movement of inculturation all over Asia and Africa. The political reason behind this was the colonial countries coming out as free nations and a spontaneous return to their own culture and time-old values which were quite often discarded by the reigning empires. But the Vatican Council II, which was concluded in 1964, gave great impetus to this movement all through its decrees on the constitution of the Church, on missions, on non-Christian religions, etc. In the light of these political and ecclesial aspirations the Churches in Asia and Africa decided for a coming back to the formation of a Church deeply rooted in their own ancestral traditions and values. However, in the beginning this movement was only engaged in the adaptation of some external symbols and rituals into the Christian prayer life. Slowly it got momentum and the inculturation movement was extended to the field of liturgical renewal, the prayer of the hours, and the sacred liturgy of the Eucharistic celebration. In India, this movement was rather powerful and enthusiastic in the first decades after Vatican II. Since deeper level of inculturation, which should be done in the light of the patterns of Indian thinking, spirituality and mysticism, the Church was very hesitant to go forward, though, as a wish and ideal to be realized, it was always talked about. In this article I am trying to present how ashram can help a deeper level of inculturation. This article has two parts: part I: The Meaning of Culture and Inculturation and part II: Ashram Spirituality and Inculturation.

Part I: Culture and Inculturation

1.1. What is Culture?

Culture is always a given reality into which we are born.

Culture can be defined as: an accepted tradition in a country to which belong its own history and philosophy, thinking patterns, way of experiencing and expressing them through art, symbols, customs and life-style. Culture is not the creation of one single individual. It is rather a tradition lived by a community of people in a certain country or in a part of the same. Christopher Dawson defines culture as "an organized way of life which is based on common tradition and conditioned by a common environment".¹ In an era of anti-organizational tendency and de-centralized social patterns, this definition may well be questioned at least by the radical leftists of our society. Still the culture of a nation largely points to certain common values and standards of behaviour. Culture sets an ethos, a mind-set and a value system. Many of these values are very commendable. However, all the values we find in a culture are not necessarily sane or sacred. Hence, counter cultural movements also take place in the same country led by their own people. Thus,, culture is not to be understood monolithically. It is flexible, subject to influence, change and progress. However, it is not commendable that a particular culture is totally replaced by another culture, i.e., by the cultural tradition of another country. In the era of colonialism the foreign governments of colonial countries have tried to do this. But in course of time the question of root and identity has haunted the citizens of the country and later the domination of the foreign culture was totally repudiated. It is in this context, the inculturation movement took place in Asia and Africa, which were the territories of colonization of the Western empires for a long period of time. Along with the break down of western empires, many scholarly studies on the East by western authors were published and they were available all over the world. A typical example of this was the series called *Sacred Books of the East*, edited by the famous indologist Max Mueller, and published from the Oxford University. These studies were published with great appreciation for eastern religions and their philosophical and spiritual heritage.

¹Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949), p.47.

2.1. The Ecclesial Movement of Inculturation

The ecclesial movement of inculturation is a must for all nations. As the culture of a country undergoes transformation, and new symbols and language of communication emerge, the Gospel message is to be communicated to the people in a language they understand. Gospel is always to be inculturated to the existing culture of the people. Thus, we have new forms of worship, patterns of prayer meetings and even new schools of theology, such as existential theology or secularist theology, etc., in the West. But inculturation movement becomes much stronger in the erstwhile-colonized countries, which were forcefully alienated from their traditional roots and cultures in the name of a falsely understood Christianity. As the nations enjoyed freedom and were eager to return to their cultural heritages the Churches in the liberated nations also came forward to participate in the national and cultural awareness that was taking shape in the newly formed nations in Asia and Africa. Hence, a quest for a more culturally integrated local Church was very much alive and active in the second half of the twentieth century. Inculturation became a living movement of the day. It was theologically supported by the documents of Vatican II and other documents from the *magisterium* and local Churches.

a) According to the documents of Vatican II the Church was conceived not as a monolithic, universal Church for the entire world, but as a communion of many individual/local Churches. In this communion each Church legitimately enjoyed the right to keep their own cultural diversities, disciplinary freedom, provided all are subject to the primacy of the Roman Pontiff.² The document on the mission states as follows:

The seed, which is the word of God sprouts from the good ground, watered by divine dew. From this ground the seed draws nourishing elements, which transforms and assimilate into itself. Finally it bears much fruit. Thus, in imitation of

²Vat. II, *Lumen Gentium: Decree on the Constitution of the Church*, para 23.

the plan of the incarnation, the young Churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps. 2: 8). 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.³

b) In 1974 the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in the final statement of its plenary assembly, spoke about inculturation as it outlined the nature of the local Church:

The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the traditions, the cultures, the religions - in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to adhere in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its lives, its inspirations, its thought and its language, its songs and its artistry.⁴

c) In the same year the African Bishops meeting at Rome made the following declaration:

In the new mission context the bishops of Africa and Madagascar consider accommodation theology to be completely outdated and they would replace it with a theology of incarnation. The young Churches cannot ignore this basic challenge. Although the bishops recognize theological pluralism in the unity of faith, they nevertheless encourage by all means research studies for an African theology, such a theology open to the fundamental aspirations of the African peoples, will bring Christianity to

³Vat. II, *Ad Gentes: The Document on Mission*, para 22.

⁴FABC: "His Gospel to Our Peoples", Book 2.

be truly incarnated in the life of the peoples of the black continent.⁵

d) In the recent encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, the Holy Father John Paul II invites the Asian nations to go forward in the way of inculturation.

My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among these lands, India has a special place. A great spiritual impulse leads Indian thought to seek an experience, which would liberate the spirit from the shackles of time and space and would therefore acquire absolute value. The dynamic of this quest for liberation provides the context for great metaphysical systems.

In India particularly, it is the duty of Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought. In this work of discernment, which finds its inspiration in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, certain criteria will have to be kept in mind.⁶

The Holy Father then gives us these criteria as follows:

1) The universality of human spirit, whose basic needs are the same in all cultures.

2) In engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought.

3) No culture (e.g., the Indian culture with its uniqueness) should think itself so special and unique that it does not need dialogue with and influence from other cultures.

Finally Holy Father concludes this section:

⁵W. Bulmann, *The Church of the Future* (1986), p. 36.

⁶John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, para 72.

What has been said here of India is no less true for the heritage of the great cultures of China, Japan and other countries of Asia, as also for riches of the traditional cultures of Africa, which are for the most part orally transmitted.⁷

In this way Holy Father calls Asia to develop its own inculturated theology after the model of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. This is not done by translating their visions and theological contributions into Asian languages. The great attempts of the fathers of the Church should be seen as models for working out our own inculturation of Christian faith in Asia, with the same degree of freedom, authenticity and profoundness of faith.

Inculturation is a much-needed movement in spite of the opposition from traditional circles. The movement has ventured for its initiatives in the field of art, architecture, music, liturgical prayers and celebration of the Eucharist, and much has been written about these areas of inculturation. I am presenting here the ashram movement as a potential agent of deep-rooted inculturation.

Part II: Ashram Spirituality and Inculturation

2.1. What is Ashram?

The word ashram is derived from the Sanskrit root *srama* which means endeavour or work. *Ashrama* is a place where intense endeavour or work is done for a particular goal. The target of the ashram endeavour can be secular or spiritual. Many of the Gandhi's ashrams were very much politically involved as they were founded as a spiritual movement against the domination of unjust power structures whether political, social or religious. However, ashram is always rooted in the power of the spirit, unconditional reliance on God's power and providence and great courage to face challenges from the world or people.

⁷*Ibid.*

The ashram way of inculturation is proposed because it is in ashrams or forest-hermitages and *gurukulas* (houses of renowned masters in the forests), much of the Indian (Hindu) theology and mysticism has been developed. Ashram is not just a venue of the theological discussion, but a place of simple living, seeking God by prayer and meditation and communicating the same to the people around or the seekers who visit the ashram for God experience.

2.2. Ashram for *Karma Sannyasa* and *Jnana Sannyasa*

The *Sannyasopanisad* speaks of these two types of *sannyas*: active or contemplative forms religious life. Both of them are the need of the people and of the Church. I felt that ashram with an emphasis on *jnanasannyasa* which is contemplative in nature is very much a need in our Church in India. Hence, Vidyavanam Ashram, which was founded by the Preshitha Province of the CMI Congregation, follows a contemplative life-style in general. Ashram is not a way of running away from the world. Ashrams are a welcome place for all people who seek God-experience in the simple settings of the ashram atmosphere.

Many Hindu ashrams publish a lot of literature pertaining to spiritual life, God-experience, meditation and theological reflections. Ramakrishna ashrams, Sivananda ashram, Aurobindo ashram etc. are brilliant examples of this. They are not primarily research works on somebody's search or experience, as usually done in western universities or even in Indian seminaries. Many of these books, which some academicians may look down upon as unscientific, are the recorded experiences of the venerable masters who lived there, sometimes written down by their disciples. An inspiring life is what simple people seek more than a scientific work of high erudition. Ashram is the right place to develop an indigenous theology, art of a simple and direct experience of the Gospel, open and approachable to all.

India has a venerable tradition of very ancient ashrams where many religious minded people, relinquishing everything they had, lived in the forest, focusing their mind and heart on God

alone. This ashram tradition goes back at least to the second millennium before Christ. Many of the renowned Upanishads were written in ashrams with the disciples "sitting at the feet" (*upa-ni-shat*) of the masters who lived there. These houses were known as *gurukula*, the house of the master. Their life-style was very simple. The supreme focus was on God alone (*brahmacarya*). Non-violence, truthfulness, non-possessiveness, self-study were some of the highly respected virtues to be practiced by the students in the ashram.

We get a glimpse of ancient Indian ashrams in the famous literary works of Kalidasa and other ancient Sanskrit authors. *Shakunthalam*, a drama written by Kalidasa, presents an ashram of Kanva- Maharshi (a great seer called Kanva) as the chosen venue in which the story of Shakunthala unfolds itself. From this play we can understand the values that were lived in the ancient ashrams of India: how they loved nature, how they cared for birds and animals, how they took care of the guests who come to the ashram and above all how they fostered a spirituality filled with love for God and simplicity of life. Similarly the play *Swapna-vasavadatta* also gives us beautiful descriptions of the ashram in ancient India.

2.3. Modern Hindu Ashrams

a) Gandhian Ashrams

Mahatma Gandhi's ashram movement is well known in India. A barrister of law and a new comer to South Africa, Gandhi was startled by the awful discrimination against the Asians in that country, when he was pulled out from the running train, because he was traveling in the first class, though he had a first class ticket. Asians were not allowed to travel in first class! Gandhi decided to fight against this open discrimination which, he argued, is against the spirit of the Christian Gospel as well as against all decent culture of humanity. The way Gandhi reacted was founding an ashram in South Africa. He abandoned all western way of life, including the dress style, returned to ashram simplicity and asked his wife to clean the toilet the very next day.

Up to that day such menial jobs were done by the so-called 'untouchables'. From this ashram he started a movement against the discrimination of the Asian people in South Africa, relying only on the power of the Spirit and the strength of truth. Later when he came to India he again started an ashram called *Satyagraha* ashram on May 25, 1915, at Kochrab, which was later moved to Sabarmati. The objective of the *Satyagraha* ashram was "that its members should qualify themselves for and make a constant endeavour towards the service of the country, not inconsistent with universal goods".⁸ The ashram was named *Satyagraha ashram*, because Gandhi based his fight against all sorts of injustice including foreign domination and rule, on the principles of truth and non-violence, which he has drawn from the ancient observances of *gurukula*. Later Gandhi found these principles well established in the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus. To the ancient *Gurukula* principle of *yama* (five principles of self-restraint) and *niyama* (five principles of healthy observances)⁹ Gandhi added the following ashram ideals: 1) Fearlessness (*sarvathra bhaya varjana*) 2) Love for one's own country and country's products (*Swadesi*) 3) equality of all religions (*sarva dharma samanatva*) 4) removal of untouchability (*sprasa bhavana*) 5) physical labour (*sarira srama*).¹⁰ These were added as virtues needed to face the then situation of foreign rule and superiority, discrimination of caste within India and so on. Later Gandhi moved to Wardha and started the ashram called *Sevagram* with the ideal of serving the villagers (*seva-gram*).

The great Gandhian disciple and colleague Acharya Vinoba Bhave founded, at the request of Gandhi, another ashram on the bank of river Paunar near Wardha in 1921. The ashram ideals were more or less same as in any Gandhian ashrams.

⁸S. Yesudason, *Ashrams Ancient and Modern*, Vellore: Sri Ramachandra Press, 1937, p. 21, quoted in Paul Pattathu, *Ashram Spirituality*, Indore: Satprakashan, 1997, p. 144.

⁹*Yama*: 1. Non-violence 2. Truthfulness 3. Non-possessiveness 4. Celibacy 5. Non-attachment: *Niyama*: 1. Cleanliness 2. Inner joy 3. Austerity 4. Self-study 5. Devotion to the Lord.

¹⁰Paul Pattathu, *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

b) Aurobindo's Ashram

Aurobindo returned to India after his education in England from his childhood onwards. After a few years of vigorous political activity related to freedom movement in India, in 1910, he moved to Pondichery, a small territory under the French government and started his ashram there. Aurobindo was a well-educated philosopher, though his specialization in England was for IAS (Indian Administrative Service). This ashram grew in size and splendour in due time, especially after the arrival of a French lady disciple, later known as "the Mother". Aurobindo was a visionary and the Mother, a true disciple, was a gifted organizer. Aurobindo's ashram tried to combine the physical, the psychological and the spiritual for the full growth of the students who are trained in the ashram. An ashram brochure says: "Ashram is founded not to deny the world, but to integrate the world into the divine."

c) Ramanamaharshi's Ashram

Ramanamaharshi (1829-1950) was a holy man who left his home and found his abode in a cave in the hills of Arunachala in Tamil Nadu. Reminding us of St. Benedict, he lived in that cave for many years and like Francis of Assisi he loved nature, birds and animals and was a beacon light for all those who visited him. His utter simplicity was very much appreciated. A large number of disciples and devotees, including his own mother and brother, followed his ideal of ashram life. Last year, the by-yearly get together of the catholic ashrams in India took place in this ashram.

d) Sivananda Ashram

This ashram was founded by Swami Sivananda at Rishikesh, Himalayas in 1932. The ashram, well set on the bank of the river Ganges, facing foothills of the Himalayas, invited many disciples from India and abroad. In a short period of time many other ashrams were founded as branches of this ashram. Sivananda believed that we need more and more ashrams for

preserving and fostering the world peace. The motto of the ashram is "Serve, love, meditate and realize."¹¹

2.4. The Christian Ashram Movement in India

a). Blessed Chavara and His Desire for *Vanavasa* (Forest-dwelling)

The original desire of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara (1805-1871), the founder of CMI congregation, was not at all to found a congregation, but to go to the forest for a life of perpetual hermitage (*vanavasa*). When Chavara and his *guru* Fr. Thomas Plackal approached the then bishop, a Spanish Carmelite, no permission was granted to fulfill this long cherished desire of the Indian seekers. Instead the Bishop proposed the idea of founding a monastery so that they may have their prayer life and at the same time remain available to the faithful in the country. Thus, the idea of hermitage was converted into founding a monastery, which later became the CMI congregation. The first monastery was founded on the hill at Mannanam in Kerala, on May 11, 1831. The Carmelite connection was established because of the then Carmelite bishop through whom they were granted the rule of the Carmelites in Europe. All the monasteries they founded in the following years were really ashrams with deep sense of silence, prayerfulness and service to the people. Except a vow of vegetarianism there was no great difference from the Indian style of ashram life. Later because of the varied institutions such as colleges, schools and so on, the ashram atmosphere was slowly disturbed and now new ashrams are being founded to restore the original ideal of ashram life, not however, giving up the various apostolic activities of the congregation. Many of the monasteries as well as the convents of the sisters are still known as ashrams in India. Thus, ashram is a very acceptable word for all religions in India.

b) Indian Church on Ashram Movement

The Indian Church on its march to inculturation and inter-

¹¹Ref. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

religious dialogue, time and again, discussed and promoted the ideal of ashram life for the Church in India. The all India seminar held in 1965 at Dharmaram College made a resolution as followed:

That immediate steps be taken to promote an authentic contemplative and monastic life in keeping with the best traditions of the Church and the spiritual heritage of India, and all encouragement be given to those who show signs of a special vocation for the life of prayer and silence, or prayer and service, in an ashram setting, even if they are already leading a priestly or religious life.¹²

The decision taken by the all India seminar was strongly supported and complemented by the all-Indian consultation on ashrams at the National Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre in Bangalore in 1978. The consultation strongly recommended the founding of Christian ashrams where the experience of God in Christ is lived out in the setting of the Indian ashram tradition. The statement continues:

This life-style should also be continuously inspired, nourished and challenged by an assimilation of the Indian religious and cultural heritage, through a regular and deep study of the Indian Scriptures and traditions on spirituality and the fostering of music and other arts.¹³

2.5. Recent Christian Ashrams

In the light of the above-mentioned statements new Catholic ashrams were being founded in India. Some of the already existing ashrams got new vigour and vitality through the recommendations given by the Church consultations.

¹²*All India Seminar Church in India Today*, Bangalore, 1969 (New Delhi: C.B.C.I. Centre. No date), 243.

¹³“What is an ‘Indian Christian Ashram’? *Word and Worship* 7 (Aug. 1978), p. 274.

a) Shanthivanam Ashram

This ashram was founded by Swami Parama Arubiananda (Jules Monchanin), a French Benedictine monk, on the banks of river Cauvery at Kulithalai near Trichirappally, on Mary 21, 1950. Later Swami Arubiananda handed over this ashram to another Benedictine monk Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux). The ashram invited many seekers from all over India and also from abroad. After many years of ashram life Swami Abhishiktananda left the ashram and headed for Himalayas as a wandering monk, handing over the ashram to another Benedictine monk, Fr. Bede Griffiths from England. Fr. Bede lived an extremely simple life in this ashram directing many seekers by his inspiring presence, simplicity of life and utter dedication to God in everything. He lived in the ashram until his death and now the ashram life is continued by his disciples some of whom are already Benedictine priests.

b) Jeevandhara Ashram

Sr. Vandana, after long years of her teaching career in Sophia College in Bombay, opted ashram life and started her pioneering ashram on Mount Himalayas, 5000 ft. above sea level at a place called Jayharihal. The scenic beauty from the ashram was enchanting as you see the peaks of Himalayas covered with snow at the top and ranges of mountains coming down up to the foot hill of the mount where the ashram is situated. Sr. Vandana, commonly known as Vandana *Mataji*, is now living in her humble cottage near Sivananda ashram mentioned above, with a few cottages attached to her cottage, where seekers are welcome. Sr. Vandana is a great admirer of Swami Sivananda and his disciple, Swami Chithananda who is now the president of Sivananda ashram. Jeevandhara ashram is now led by Fr. Thomas Kochumuttam, a CMI priest, a specialist in Buddhism and inter-religious dialogue in thought and in actual living.

c) Anjali Ashram

Founded by the late Fr. Amalorpavadas in Mysore near Chamundi Hills, on 15 August 1979, this ashram has attracted a

host of seekers in a short period of time. Fr. Amalorpavadas, the founder of National Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), was a well known theologian, organizer and a man with great prophetic vision. His ashram was also a venue of great inculturation movement. Set in the atmosphere of an inter-religious context, ashram conducted courses in Indian Christian Spirituality as well as other problems of the Indian Church. The present *Acharya* of this ashram is Fr. Louis.

d) Vidyavanam Ashram

Inspired by the vision and wish of Blessed Chavara who wanted to go to the forest for a life of hermitage, I approached my superiors for founding an ashram in an interior village of Karnataka, near Bangalore. I got wholehearted support from my provincial and the monasteries of the province made great donations from their meager resources for the fulfillment of this long cherished desire of mine. The ashram was named *Vidyavanam*, forest of wisdom, which reminds us of the original desire of Bl. Chavara, the founder of the CMI Congregation. The motto of the ashram is *vanadastu vidyodaya*: "let wisdom emerge from woods". Founded in 1996, on February 10, the birthday of Bl. Chavara, the ashram has now become a venue of experimentation of living and experiencing Christian faith in Indian genius. Courses, retreats and seminars conducted in this ashram have this focus, with an emphasis on realizational knowledge of God. Realizational knowledge is lived through a life-style of *tapasya* which include meditation, liturgical prayers and also actions programmes expressive of the attitude of sharing and mutual acceptance. Knowing by faith rather than reason is more important here, because faith includes also surrender to what one believes. "I have to become what I meditate and as a Christian I meditate Jesus and hence am called to become another Jesus". This is the ideal of realizational knowledge in an Indian Christian ashram. Because of this, in this ashram almost always meditations are focused on Jesus Christ with a special emphasis of absorbing the mind of Jesus into us. It also involves a movement from the rational level of understanding of faith-doctrines to an experiential level of knowing God through faith.

A lot of rationalization of faith is not necessarily growth in faith experience.

There are many other Christian ashrams of recent origin. In spite of the criticism from some activists in the Church, ashrams are on the increase. I have mentioned here only a few of the Catholic ashrams which I know personally.

2.6. Ashram Values and Life-style

Ashrams, whether Hindu or Christian, share a lot of values dear to the country. In our attempt to foster inculturation, it is values that count. Genuine values that are dear to the country and agreeable to the Gospel ideals should be lived and fostered in the ashrams. I am giving below some values generally revered and strongly recommended in all ashrams, whether Hindu or Christian.

a). Blessed Simplicity

Blessed simplicity is an art of life. The ashramites are expected to be simple people (*sadhu or sadhvi*), straightforward and transparent. Blessed simplicity is not the immature childish simplicity, which though a welcome character in babies, often gets tarnished as the child grows and confronts the duplicity and merciless cruelty in the world. On the contrary, blessed simplicity is an attitude, consciously aspired and maintained with creative fidelity to the mind of Jesus who was always simple, open, loving and self-giving.

b). Realizational Knowledge of God

In ashrams, generally speaking, knowledge is becoming. An ancient Upanishadic dictum says: *Brahmavid brahmo bhavati*, "he who knows Brahman becomes Brahman". A Christian version of this would be: "he who knows Christ becomes another Christ". This is fully in conformity with the ancient Christian dictum which said: "Every Christian is another Christ." Meditation plays an important role in this process of realization. What you meditate that you become. We meditate Jesus that we

become like Jesus, another Christ, imbibing the vision and the spirit of Jesus. To know Jesus deeply is to be transformed by his consciousness, which is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus breathed into us. This is the 'third eye' through which a disciple of Christ tries to see, evaluate and experience everything in this world and in the world to come.

c). Poverty and Life-style

As I said earlier, ashrams can be founded with a view to foster active or contemplative way of life. In the contemplative ashrams the ashramites try to serve people remaining in the ashram, welcoming lovingly everyone, and sharing with them what they have. All are welcome to the ashram without any discrimination of caste, colour, wealth or status, provided they are genuine seekers of truth or God-experience and men and women of spiritual search. Poverty is practiced especially in the simplicity of food, cutting down the expenses and avoiding expensive amenities of life.

d). Love of Nature

Ashrams bring you closer to nature. An eco-friendly atmosphere is made that you come back to nature quite often. In some ashrams sessions are conducted outside, under the canopy of sky, shady branches of trees where small galleries are made. Little bit of garden work and other forms of *ashram seva* also keep you close to nature and call you to read and relish the symbols of God you see in nature.

e). Love of Silence

Silence is the medium through which God speaks. To listen to the unuttered word of God we need silence. By silence we do not mean just the atmospheric silence. That is only the most external layer of our silence. The senses must be silenced with desirelessness, which St. John of the Cross calls the night of the senses; the mind must be silenced by concentration, *ekagrata*: one-pointedness of attention. Finally the human consciousness, which is the essence of soul, should be transformed into and filled

with the consciousness of Christ. Only through a culture of silence one can reach this goal.

f). Hospitality

Atithidevobhava (consider your guest as God) is an Indian ideal revered by a venerable tradition. This is a part of the exhortation given to the departing disciples of *gurukula*. *A-tithi* is a person who comes without an appointment (or date: *tithi*). In ancient days, when the facilities of communication was much less or practically nil, the guests who visit ashrams, mostly set in the forest, could not communicate the plan of their visit earlier. Hence, it was all the more an obligation of the ashramites to take care of the visitors with love and affection. Now also, as a rule, ashrams give great importance to hospitality as an expression of their love and human solidarity.

g). Inter-religious Harmony and Dialogue

All ashrams are not necessarily inter-religious ashrams. However, ashrams welcome people of all religions. Ashrams are a good venue for inter-religious meetings and live-together programmes. Keeping an eco-friendly, serene atmosphere, a life of simplicity and openness, ashram provides a venue for inter-religious dialogue and mutual sharing. Moreover, spiritual quest being a common factor in all ways of spiritual life, ashrams share a lot with the ashrams and spiritual centers of other religions.

Conclusion

Inculturation should not be only in giving some ideas, but also in living a life attuned to the country's spiritual traditions. In India, ashram is certainly a welcome venue of inculturation. A place where deeper spiritual experience is sought in an atmosphere of serenity and simplicity, prayer and study, search and research is the best venue for experimentation in inculturation.

We need in the Indian/Asian Churches, houses which foster a conducive atmosphere for prayer, silence and contemplation. In

the West, even now many Benedictine monasteries keep a commendable tradition of great silence, serenity and prayerfulness and people come there for their spiritual nourishment. This is something the Asian Churches miss. Benedictine monasteries, though different in structure, are western equivalents of our Indian ashrams. Indian ashrams are structurally simpler and enjoy perhaps more freedom and adjustability. The Asian Christianity must have houses or ashrams fostering deeper silence and profounder meditation leading to genuine God-experience. This is because Asia abounds in Hindu ashrams and Buddhist monasteries of this type. A life of deeper commitment, which transcends over everything, must characterize us. At least there must be some places set apart for that, for those who yearn for it.