Culture is a concept that is extensively studied by social scientists. In the next course, it will come into play in major ways when we do social analysis for ministry.

Doing theological reflection with cultural context in mind provides depth and specificity, and reminds us to appreciate the goodness of God’s creative activity and the call to humans to cooperate with that activity through the making of and participation in culture. I believe that any attempt at theological reflection that does not take culture into account is both irresponsible to the people that we seek to serve through our ministry, and ultimately disrespectful of God’s desire to be revealed amid cultures.

For Catholics, the Second Vatican Council’s document, Gaudium et spes (The Church in the Modern World), is extremely important in its insights about how culture contributes to human well-being and how it heightens our ability to be open to God’s presence. In Article 57, the Council Fathers stated:

> By the work of our hands or with the help of technology, we till the earth to produce fruit and to make it a dwelling place fit for all of humanity; we also play our part in the life of social groups. ...Furthermore, when we work in the disciplines of philosophy, history, mathematics and science and when we cultivate the arts, we can greatly help humanity to reach a higher understand of truth, goodness, and beauty, to make judgments of universal value. Humanity will thus be more fully enlightened by the marvelous wisdom, which was with God from eternity, fashioning all things with God, rejoicing in God’s inhabited world, and delighting in humanity’s sons and daughters. As a consequence the human spirit, freed from the bondage of material things, can be more easily drawn to the worship and contemplation of the creator.
In our developing diagram of TR, then, we’ll need to place this process within the realities of cultural context:

In a globalized world, it also becomes apparent that culture is constantly changing. Vatican II spoke both of a universal sense of “culture” in the singular and of the legitimacy of plural “cultures.” The Council warned against a dominant culture damaging other cultures. It, along with many other Church documents, expressed confidence that the Gospel of Christ can be planted in diverse cultures and contexts throughout the world. Such confidence is integral to the Church’s self-understanding as “catholic.”
In the developing world, there is ample evidence both of the richness of cultures and of the past and present influences that have harmed them. Christian missionaries have sometimes helped to preserve the best of local cultures, but sometimes have tried to repress or eliminate them, in the name of Christ.

In the Spiritan tradition, the words of co-founder Francis Libermann are often invoked to show a positive attitude toward encountering indigenous cultures. Libermann exhorted his missionary confreres in Africa:

Do not judge by first impressions. Do not judge according to what you have seen in Europe, according to what you have been used to in Europe. Rid yourselves of Europe, of its customs and spirit. Become black with the Blacks, and you will judge them appropriately. Become black with the Blacks, to form them appropriately, not in the European fashion, but leaving them what belongs to them. Be to them as servants should be to their masters…. This is what St. Paul calls making oneself all things to all, so as to win all for Jesus Christ.¹

American missiologist Robert Schreiter declares that “the development of local theologies depends as much on finding Christ already active in the culture as it does on bringing Christ to the culture.”² His premise is that Christ is already at work in the culture for people’s salvation before Christians arrive there.

Naturally, given our human condition, sin and brokenness are also present in every culture, as well as in human actions to damage or destroy cultures. In the developing world, there is a tragic legacy of cultural decimation due to colonization and its aftermath. Whatever your own context, you are probably aware of such negative experiences.


The reading from Elochukwu Uzukwu in this unit provides a strong indictment of this pattern on the African continent. He believes that hope for Africa’s future rests on appropriate revitalization of the best of precolonial, local culture, with the Gospel of Christ fully inculturated within it. Such **inculturation** is facilitated by the African church, which dedicates itself to social transformation while defending the church’s right to be truly indigenous.
Glossary

- **Culture**: all the interrelated elements that are produced by people to create their way of life, including objects, beliefs, customs, symbols, values and worldviews.
  - Go back

- **Context**: the particular setting in which a particular group of people has experiences. This includes time and place as well as members’ self-understanding of their identity and the factors shaping it (including history, social class, etc).
  - Go back

- **Inculturation**: the “planting” or incarnation of the Gospel in various and diverse cultures, as an activity of the Church in its mission of evangelization.
  - Go back