

CATHOLIC MISSION AND EVANGELIZATION OF AFRICA

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Introduction

Any discussion of Catholic mission in Africa carries with it a reference to various phases of evangelization of the continent. A person would have to be blind not to see in Africa, the long presence of Christianity before the two centuries (15th and 19th) missionary expansions. The history of Christianity in Africa is as old as the Christianity itself. However, this does not imply that the whole of Africa encountered the Christian faith at the same time. Hence, one is led to ask: how did the evangelization of Africa start? What inspiration could one get from the early efforts so as to understand the reasons for the present one? Finally, what is the Catholic mission contribution in the evangelization of Africa? In order to answer these questions, the present study will concentrate only on the phases of evangelization of Africa, with particular focus on the role of the Catholic mission from the earliest times to the present in the planting of Christianity in the continent, with their results and open problems.

Phases of Evangelization of Africa

Allowing for some overlapping, the phases of evangelization of Africa could be divided into five. The first phase began with the founding of the Church in North Africa; the second phase covers the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Christian expansions in sub-Saharan Africa; while the third phase is the period of the great missions, from the nineteenth century up to Vatican Council II. The fourth phase is from Vatican Council II to the celebration of the First Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa (1994); and the fifth phase is the Post-Synod Africa, leading to the Second Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa (2009). Since the history of these phases of evangelization of Africa is so vast and varied, I shall present only an outline here.

1. *The Church in North Africa*

Christianity began in Africa along the Mediterranean Coast of the continent, starting from Egypt, the North Africa Maghreb region (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, etc), and reaching Ethiopia which shared almost the same history of Christianity with Egypt and the ancient Nubia. The history of Christianity in modern Africa cannot be adequately grasped without linking it to this early phase of Christian mission in the continent. In other words, Christianity came to Africa in its early centuries through Mediterranean Coasts and Trans-Saharan routes. It was only from 15th century European expansion that Catholic mission began to reach the other parts of Africa through the coasts of Atlantic Ocean thanks to the newly discovered transatlantic trade routes and the papal privileges (*padroado*) granted to the Portuguese Sovereign by the Popes.

According to historians of African Christianity, as far as the first phase of the evangelization of Africa is concerned it can be traced back to 62 AD, when as a matter of fact the believers in Christ in North Africa began to organize and consolidate themselves as a Christian community. The Apostle Mark is the acclaimed founder of the Church in Egypt. In this regard, there are biblical references to the early presence or continent's encounter with the Christian faith. These are the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt (cf. Matt 2,13-23), and the incident of a certain Simon of Cyrene who is taken and made to help in carrying the cross of Jesus Christ (Luke 23,26). Now in Acts 2,10, we read: "...Libya belonging to Cyrene...", implies strongly that Cyrene is also in (North) Africa. If this is so, then Simon of Cyrene, was an African. The implication of this is that the African continent is brought in at two very crucial moments in the life of Jesus Christ: at his infancy,

safeguarding him from those who wanted to kill him, and at his passion, helping him to carry the cross of salvation.

Moreover, there are other biblical evidences of Africa's contact with the Christian faith. At the Pentecost event, Africans from North Africa are said to have been among the witnesses. In other words, Africans were present at the public inauguration of the Church on the Pentecost Day in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2,1-13). In Acts 2,10, we find that among those present on the Pentecost day and who participated on the official inauguration of the Church, are people from "...Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene...". There is also the incident of the Ethiopian eunuch. In Acts 8,26-40, we read of how the Apostle Philip instructed and baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, who returned to Africa with his new faith.

However, to be more specific, and as already noted, the evangelization effort of this first phase is believed to have started around AD 62, begun by Saint Mark the evangelist,¹ the first Bishop of Alexandria (Baur 1994: 21). By the second half of the second century, Christianity had established considerable roots in North Africa, especially in Alexandria and Cyrenaica. This phase witnessed the first official organized presence of the Church in Africa. Little wonder then that by the middle of the third century, the whole of the Roman North Africa had become a "flourishing Mission territory" with many dioceses and Bishops. It is recorded that at the Synod of Carthage (256), more than 87 Bishops were present, while during the Synod of Alexandria in 321/324, Egypt alone had over 100 dioceses and by the year 430 the number of Catholic Bishoprics in North Africa had grown to almost 600 (cf. Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa (1994): *Lineamenta* 1990: no 3).

The strength of the Church at this era is not limited to the number of Bishops and Bishoprics. From Egypt, Christianity spread down the Nile to Kush and Nubia. Indeed it was an active, strong and productive Church. For instance, this phase produced the first African martyrs (e.g., Felicity and Perpetua of Carthage); holy women (e.g Monica and Thecla). The Church in North Africa also gave Christianity its first theological institutes at Alexandria and Carthage respectively. The theological school of Alexandria played a great role in the early councils of the Church, especially in the East for the formulations of some basic dogmas of the Church. Among the great theologians of the Alexandrian school, we can only mention the following, Athanasius, Cyril, Origen, Clement, etc. From the Church in Egypt (Copt) we have founders of monasticism (St Anthony of Egypt, St. Paul the Hermit and St. Pachomius). The school of Carthage also produced for the Church in the West great theologians such as Tertullian, Augustine and Cyprian. Some of these African theologians (from the schools of Alexandria and Carthage) helped to shape the spiritual and theological heritage of Christianity as it encountered the Greco-Roman world,² and responded to the challenges engendered by the process (cf. Jedin – Dolan 1980: 337). The Church in Africa at this era also played a notable role at the central administration of the Church. It gave the universal Church St. Victor I who was the Pope from 189 to 199, St. Melchiades (311-314) and St. Gelasius I (492-496) (cf. Frend 1982: 410).

However, the vibrant Church of North Africa did not last so long before it began to encounter many difficulties which weakened it and quickened its decline in the seventh, and almost total disappearance in the eighth century. The Church was destabilized by internal conflicts provoked by doctrinal controversies. There were also external factors, such as the invasions of the Vandals from

¹It is not the interest of our study to enter into the debate among theologians about "an apostolic origin for the African Church". Biblical references transcend "secular writings or authors". That there is an apostolic origin for the African Church is discernible from the very symbolic gesture of Pope Paul VI in June 1968, namely: having the relics of St. Mark sent from Venice to Cairo. No less significant is the fact that up to date St. Mark is venerated in the Coptic Church as the founder and patron of the See of Alexandria (cf. Moloney 1988: 91-96).

²If this is so then the claim that the Christian faith brought to Africa, is clothed mainly with the western culture needs further investigations. The truth is that early African Christians contributed in shaping the Christian patrimony as we have it then and even today. Therefore, Christianity should not be identified with a particular culture. It transcends any culture. What it does is that in the encounter with cultures of the world it shapes and gives meaning to them as it allows itself to be expressed in each cultural context.

AD 429 to 439, Muslim occupation of North Africa between seventh and eleventh centuries, all contributed to the disappearance. With the Muslim conquest of North Africa, the organized life of the churches disintegrated and could not hold their faithful against the stimulating effects of the new and vigorous Islam (Spencer 1962: 17).

The Coptic Church survived in Egypt as a minority, reduced to a state of protected minority (*dhimmi*), for which it had to pay tax (Bret 1982: 499). Christianity survived in Ethiopia, in spite of the poor education of its clergy and many years of isolation from the rest of the Christian world (caused by the Arab-Muslim occupation of trans-Saharan routes), because it appropriated local cultural elements congenial to African religiosity (Mbiti 1990: 230; Shenk 1993: 131-154).

Among the reasons given for the disappearance of the Church in North Africa, is its relative failure in the area of inculturation. It has also been observed that the churches in North Africa never looked towards the Sahara. The Church in Egypt in all its' splendor lived and looked-up for almost everything towards the Church of the East and the Constantinople. The case of the Church in Carthage was even worse. If the Church in Egypt made some attempts at evangelizing the interior and largely rural areas of that part of Africa down to Nubia and Ethiopia, the Church of Carthage was purely a metropolitan community and so did not consider it necessary to engage in a vigorous missionary enterprise in the hinterlands and among rural communities in its domain (cf. Baur 1994: 29ff.). However, whether these charges are true or not remains to be demonstrated. The obvious fact is that the buoyant North African churches disappeared (cf. Oborji 1998: 50).

2. The 15th Christian Expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa

The second phase of Africa's contact with the Christian faith began with the arrival of Portuguese navigators in sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century. After the fall of the Church in North Africa, there were some attempts by some religious missionaries like the Franciscans, the Trinitarians and the Mercedarians, along the Mediterranean coast to save the situation. However, the heroic efforts of these religious missionaries could not do much. Hence, Africa has to wait until the fifteenth century for the "second missionary journey" of the Christian faith. This time, unlike the first, which concentrated on the Roman Africa, Ethiopia and their neighbors, the inhabitants of the tropical and sub-tropical Africa received the Christian message, that is, the Christians of Africa, south of the Sahara (cf. Nwachukwu 1994: 18).

The great king of the Congo, Nzinga a Nkuwu, asked for missionaries to proclaim the Gospel to his people. The missionaries did arrive. The first group to make this event possible as we have noted earlier on, were the Portuguese. The Portuguese explorers brought with them, priests who became the first missionaries along the West African coasts. Many more missionaries came later, with the approval of the Portuguese kings, as was stipulated on the privileges of patronage (*padroado*) granted them by the Popes over the new missions in Africa (Baur 1994: 48).

The achievements of this missionary phase included: the erection of parish house by 1462 in the island of Santiago, a Bishopric by 1533 at Cape Verde, and the Episcopal ordination of Don Henrique as the first native Bishop from Africa, south of the Sahara. Mission houses were also founded in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Benin and the island of Sao Tome. From these mission houses the following areas were also catered for: central Congo, Angola, the south-west of Mozambique, the islands of Madagascar and Mauritius. Missionary activities were also extended to Ethiopia (Abyssinia). This extension of the missionary activities to Ethiopia establishes link once again, between the decadent North African Church and the Church in Europe. Efforts were made to erect seminaries, for example in Cape Verde (1510), in Congo (1682). Had these materialized, it could have at least ensured the continuity of these missions.

However, the newly founded missions began to decline. Neither the erection of an Apostolic Prefecture of the Congo in 1640 and the consequent arrival of the (Italian) Capuchins in 1645, nor the advent of the French also in seventeenth century could help in salvaging the situation. Such that

by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the second phase of the missionary enterprise in Africa had failed practically.³

As observed today by many scholars, this missionary phase failed because of the divided interests exhibited by the nations to whom the Vatican entrusted the work. However, there are other characteristics of this phase. Firstly, the missionary work of this phase concentrated mainly on the coastal regions, as the African inland was not yet explored. In addition, the churches established were very European in structures, worship, and life-style. This included as well, the vision of the mission at the time. This was the period when the missionary work was seen as the Church's bounded duty to bring the true faith to pagans, or to save souls that were in darkness. Christianity was intended to civilize and to save Africans from idolatry, immoral marriages (Polygamy), and the devil (cf. Kalilombe 1981: 55; Baur 1994: 66-68). With this type of attitude, the efforts of this phase did not really take the African spiritual vision into serious consideration. In any case, there were exceptions to this. For instance, the Capuchins in Congo and Angola recognized the relevance of their knowing the African languages and understanding the customs and mentality of the people (Oborji 1998: 52).

However, there are other factors to the reasons why the mission of this phase could not succeed. There was the problem of Portugal's inability to meet the increasing need for missionaries in the missions with the decline of religious vocations. Added to this was the general suppression of religious Orders in Portugal in 1834. This suppression so intensified the damage begun by the earlier one directed against the Jesuits in 1773. Again, many missionaries found the tropical climate rather hostile. This caused a great set-back to the needed manpower in the African missions. Added to the above factors, were the events of the era: the French Revolution and the Napoleonic "threat", which affected the whole Europe, the "mission sending zone" of the then "Christian world."

3. The 19th Century Missionary Expansions

The third phase of the effort to evangelize Africa is historically linked with the previous (second) phase. It covers the period of the great missionary expansions, from the nineteenth century to Vatican Council II. This period coincided with the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the colonization of Africa, and independence of many African countries. The period witnessed attempts among nations of the world towards reaching better understanding after the two World Wars. The initial missionary impetus of the era came from Benedict XV's apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* (1919) and Pius XI's encyclical letter *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926).

Many missionary institutes were founded in France during the period, specifically for the *conversion* of Africans to Christianity. Among these are: the Holy Ghost Congregation (founded earlier in France by Father Francois-Claude Poullart des Places, along with a seminary consecrated to the Holy Ghost on Pentecost Sunday in the year 1703 for the training of vicars, and missionary priests and of ecclesiastics to run hospitals in poor parishes and other abandoned zones for which the Bishops could not provide personnel); the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, founded in 1807 by Anne Marie Javouhey, a French religious; the Society of African Missions founded by Marion Brésillac in 1856; the Missionaries of Africa (commonly known as White Fathers), was founded by Cardinal Lavigerie in 1868 (Obi 1985: 7).

Consequently, Portugal was virtually replaced by France in the missions in Africa. It was also during this period that the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* issued the *ius commissionis* by which mission territories were allocated to particular missionary institutes⁴ to evangelize and administer.⁵

³ J. Bouchaud, J. Baur, and F. Nwachukwu, in their various studies, treated in some detail these missions (cf. BOUCHAUD 1967: 172-186; BAUR 1994: 55-99; NWACHUKWU 1994: 18-20).

⁴ However, because no systematic theology of mission was worked out until the twentieth century; each missionary institute of this phase, followed its own concept of mission (cf. Oborji 1998: 53).

⁵ For more on this decree see *S.C. DE PROPAGANDA FIDE*, "Instructio ad vicarios prefectosque et ad superiores institutorum, quibus a S. Sede missionibus sunt" (8 December 1929): *AAS* 22 (1930), pp. 111-115.

In principle, the Pope himself, represented by *Propaganda Fide*, had the primary responsibility for evangelization, and not a monarch, as it was the practice in earlier times (Ela 1986: 11). The missionary institutes were therefore responsible to the Pope and not to their national sovereigns in matters concerning the mission territories. Nevertheless, some missionaries had to collaborate with the colonial administrators representing their nations in Africa, and the latter helped in financing mission projects such as, schools, hospitals, Church buildings, and so forth.⁶ But this was not the case in all the places. There were places where the colonial masters impeded missionary activities, either because of anticlericalism of the colonizing nation, or because the Christian Gospel and the education of Africans by missionaries undermined the colonial ideology (cf. P. Charles 1938: 386).

One remarkable feature of this phase was the gradual move from the understanding of the goal of mission as saving of souls to that of planting of churches, which included building of schools and hospitals, and other forms of social services. However, many missionaries interpreted the planting of churches literally, and tried to reproduce in Africa carbon copies of the churches in Europe, especially in terms of architecture, organizations and devotions. Again, some missionaries tended to judge the cultures of the "mission land" according to the criteria of their own cultural traditions. In most cases, such judgments were very negative; so much so that the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* had to intervene in 1939, to warn against negative and distorted interpretations of the traditions of the peoples of the mission lands.⁷

During this phase also, the Bible and Catechetical books were translated into some African languages. Apart from that, there was no much effort to carry on theological investigations into various aspects of African cultural elements and religiosity as a necessary step towards inculturation (cf. Baur 1994: 107-109).

Furthermore, this phase witnessed unfortunate inter-denominational rivalries among missionaries. Christian missionaries of different denominations were competing to outdo one another with regard to winning converts and establishing social services. This type of attitude made some Africans to question the motive of the missionaries. In addition, it made Africans confused about which denomination to follow. It was really a scandal in the face of the new converts. Moreover, the competition caused unnecessary duplications in the establishment of social services as each group often tried to outdo the other. On a more serious note, the rivalries aggravated ethnic divisions among the local populace (cf. Mbiti 1990: 232-233).

Indeed, a good number of African authors are very critical of the missionary efforts of this phase (cf. Parratt 1995: 7). The aspects of the missionary efforts of this phase that have aroused the condemnation of the African authors and theologians, include: the missionaries' involvement in colonial rule, denigration of traditional rites and customs, attitudes of superiority based on skin pigmentation and of paternalism, and unhappy desire to keep the African Church for as long as possible under European control.⁸

However, many Africans regard the missionaries of this phase as the real founders of Christianity in modern Africa and are remembered with deep gratitude and admiration (cf. Synod of Bishops 1994: *Message* no. 6). Evidences of the success of the missionary efforts of this phase could be seen both in the numerical strength and geographical distribution of the faithful. For instance, before the official opening of the Vatican Council II in the 1960s, the Church was present almost everywhere on the continent and on the islands. J. Bouchaud writes that by 1964, when the Vatican Council II was in session, Africa has a total population of 230 million. Out of this figure, African Christians numbered 50 million (26 million Catholics, 19 million Protestants, 5 million

⁶In general the British, Belgian and Portuguese colonialists assisted missionaries in their territories with regard to the education of Africans, which was not always the case with other colonial masters (cf. BOUCHAUD 1967:177; MOSMAN 1961: 69-70).

⁷Though this was occasioned by the situation in Asia, it also applied to the African missions (cf. S.C. DE PROPAGANDA FIDE, "Instructio circa prudentiorem de rebus missionalibus tractandi rationem" (9 June 1939): *AAS* 31 (1939), p. 269.

⁸For more of such remarks see PARRATT (1995: 7ff.); FASHOLÉ-LUKE et al. (1978: 357ff.); S.TORRES & V.FABELLA (1976: 222-266).

Orthodox); Muslims, 95 million; African traditional religionists, 85 million. Catholics represent about 12 percent of the population (cf. Bouchaud 1967: 41).

In addition, it could be said that the efforts of the missionaries produced good Christians, among these are: the Ugandan martyrs, Blessed Clementine Anwarite (Virgin and Martyr from Congo), Blessed Victoria Rasoamanarivo of Madagascar, Blessed Josephine Bakhita of the Sudan, Blessed Bakanja Isidore (the Zairean martyr beatified on April 1994), and the Blessed Michael Cyprian Tansi of Aguleri, Nigeria (a Cistercian Monk). Other causes are reaching their final stages (cf. John Paul II: *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 34).

Within this phase also, some Africans were accepted for the priesthood and religious life. These were to continue the work begun by the missionaries. The Pastoral methods in vogue during this phase include: Outstations, Christian village, School and hospital apostolate. Very significantly, by the mid-twentieth century, missionaries of this era, together with the newly evangelized Africans (theologians) began talking of the possibility of local theologies and pastoral methods for the African churches. These were to mature to what we call today "African theology." That was the general situation up to the Vatican II (cf. Baur 1994: 290-193).

4. From Vatican II (1962-1965) to the African Synod (1994)

The fourth phase of evangelization of Africa is the period from Vatican Council II to the first Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa (1994). This phase has been described as a dynamic period of missionary commitment in the African churches; a period during which the whole world has started to benefit from the efforts of evangelization in the young churches of Africa. The missionary impetus of this phase naturally, is from the Vatican Council II's teaching, especially its' missionary theology of local churches as agents of mission in their territories. This led to the consolidation of the local hierarchy initiated by Pope Paul VI with his apostolic letter *Africae terrarum* (1967) and inauguration of SECAM during his historic visit to Kampala, Uganda in 1969 (cf. Hickey 1982: 198ff).⁹

Again, the main impetus for this phase came from the Vatican Council II missionary decree *ad gentes* which defines mission in its two-fold aims of evangelization and church formation (AG 6). The Council's missionary juridical system of *mandatum* which replaced the *ius commissionis* also empowered the local bishops as fully responsible for evangelization in their dioceses. The missionaries are to enter into contract with bishops in whose dioceses they wish to serve (AG 26; CIC canon 790). This new approach is centered on the Council's theology of mission as reciprocal activity between sister churches. In other words, the Council developed a theology of co-responsibility in evangelization and of trust on the local churches. This is a rediscovery of the local churches as the primary agents of mission (cf. Oborji 2001: 116).

But how have the African local churches been carrying out this role of being agents of mission? Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum of Darkar, in his capacity as the General Relator of the Synod Bishops for Africa (1994) presents the African churches approach to the mission of evangelization. According to Cardinal Thiandoum, evangelization is at the center of the missionary activity of the African churches today. It is first of all "Good News", as the very word connotes. It is the proclamation to the world of the good and joyful news that God, who loves us, has redeemed and is redeeming his world through Christ. In its method and aim, therefore, evangelization must seek to give Good News to the world, and in particular, to peoples of Africa and Madagascar:

In a continent full of bad news, how is the Christian message "Good News" for our people? In the midst of an all-pervading despair, where lies the hope and optimism which the gospel brings? Evangelization stands for many of those essential values which our continent very much lacks: hope, joy, peace, love, unity and harmony.

⁹ SECAM = Symposium for Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar.

Africa is in dire need of the gospel message for through the gospel God builds up his family (Synod of Bishops 1994: *Relatio ante-disceptationem*, no. 2).

In this regard therefore, the African local churches operate with a positive and *integral concept* of evangelization as clearly set forth in the relevant official documents of the church. It involves, no doubt, the preaching of the Word, inviting hearers to accept Jesus and his saving message and to enter into his church. But it is wider and deeper than that. It includes the transformation of human society through the message and living witness of the church and her members. It is therefore that what the Gospels refer to as the "Reign of God" which comes about: promoting peace and justice, restoring human dignity and bringing this world as close to God's designs as possible. Evangelization touches all human beings and every human person, as also every aspect of human life. In the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II considers evangelization in its three different situations: mission *ad gentes*, pastoral care and new evangelization, all of which are realities of major importance (John Paul II: *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 33). In the African context, however, one often speaks of phases of evangelization which sometimes overlap. These are: primary evangelization whereby the gospel is brought to those who have never received it, pastoral care of those already in the church and witness of Christian living as a necessary implication of our faith. The Catholic Church has, in recent years been calling for a new evangelization, "new in method, new in expression and new in zeal. There is need to work out what this means in the context of the different local churches of Africa.

Practical Results and Open Problems

Put together, a remarkable feature of this phase is the birth of indigenous hierarchy, missionary institutes and religious Congregations, along with a formidable lay faithful. Though, there are patches of foreign missionaries in many parts of Africa (which demonstrate the universality of the Church), yet during this phase Africans have started to take responsibility for the churches in their land. Addressing the Fathers of the Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa, Cardinal Josef Tomko, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (to whom almost all the African local Churches are still dependent), gave the following statistics: "in Africa today there are 412 ecclesial jurisdictions, excluding 18 circumstances dependent on other Vatican Curia offices; 66 of these are under missionary Bishops or other missionary orders; 327 are governed by African Bishops (to which must be added 15 auxiliaries). In all Africans constitute 90% of the total number of Bishops in Africa today" (Tomko 1994: 18).

The reality of indigenous hierarchy in the African churches, is a result of increase in priestly and religious vocations in the continent. A recent Statistical Church Year Book shows that, while the population of Catholics in Africa stood at 98,851,000 (the total population of the continent estimated at 688,176,000), that of the priests and religious stood thus: diocesan priests, 12,231; religious priests, 10,269; men religious (Brothers), 6,126; women religious, 46,224; and catechists, 297,714. All these point to the fact that in Africa, seminaries, novitiates and other formation houses are very much alive.

In addition to the formation houses and catechetical centers, higher ecclesiastical institutes have been also founded in different regions and countries of Africa. These include: *Institut Catholique d'Afrique de l'Ouest* (ICAO) at Abidjan, Ivory Coast (canonical erection: 12.8.1975); Catholic Higher Institute of East Africa (CHIEA) at Nairobi, Kenya (canonical erection: 2.5.1984); *Facultés Catholique de Kinshasa*, Zaire (canonical erection: 25.11.1987); *Institut Catholique de Yauondé*, Cameroon (canonical erection: 15.11.1991); Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) at Port Harcourt, Nigeria (canonical erection: 9.5.1994).

Another fact about this phase is the founding of many religious institutes in the African churches. Some of these are: the Congregation of *Our Lady of Kilimanjaro* (Moshi, Tanzania); institute of the *Handmaids of the Child Jesus* (Calabar, Nigeria); the *Benetereziva Institute*

(Burundi); the *Benibikira* Congregation (Rwanda); the *Bannabikira* Congregation (Uganda); the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ (Nigeria); institute of *Apostles of Jesus* (Moroto, Uganda); the institute of the *Evangelizing Sisters of Mary* (female wing of the *Apostles of Jesus*, Moshi, Uganda); institute of the Brothers of St. Stephen (Onitsha, Nigeria); Missionary Society of St. Paul (Nigeria), and so forth (cf. Oborji 2008: 158).

Another area where there is strong evidence of growth in the African churches is in the numerical strength of the faithful. In the years leading to the Jubilee 2000, the statistics for Africa shows that Christians represent 45.4% of the entire population. The annual rate of increase by then was 3.55%, while the population itself was said to be increasing at 2.72%. It was projected that these rates of increase would by the new century produce 400 million Christians in Africa accounting for almost half of the total population and nearly 86% of the population would have been evangelized. In a more restricted level however, when it was said in the same period that the entire population of Africa stood at 571,946,000, the number of Catholics was 74,988,000, representing 13.11% of the total population of the continent. All the recently published Church Statistical Year Books (*Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*) show that Africa is the fastest growing Catholic zone in the world, "where the increase has been 50% in the last ten years".

However, the increase in the numerical strength of the local hierarchy, priests and religious, and the lay faithful does not mean that African churches have achieved the needed adulthood in their growth. African churches are yet to utilize the autonomy granted them as particular or local churches, for the development of acceptable local liturgies, theologies, spirituality and moral. They are yet to develop African structures for Church organization. Generally speaking, Church structures in Africa are still as at the earlier phases, modeled on the mother-churches of the pioneer missionaries. Basically, this type of situation renders the local churches in Africa very dependent on the mother churches on which they were modeled.

However, some efforts have been made in some of the local churches towards inculturation. An example is the Zairean (Congolese) local church which developed its "form for the celebration of Mass."¹⁰ There are also the Cameroonian Mass (which enjoys the approval of the local bishop); the Eucharistic Prayers of East Africa, and the ritual for the consecration of virgins in Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo). Apart from these, similar efforts are emerging in other parts of Africa. For instance, in West Africa, there are particular ways in which the Eucharistic celebration is turning native among the Ashanti, Yoruba, and the Igbo groups. But the emerging liturgical contribution of this region to African Christianity and to the universal church is in developing Christian passage or transition rites. This region has consequently produced a very well-developed adaptation of traditional initiation rites to the received Christian rites (the Moore ritual in the diocese of Diebouyou, Bourkina Faso); a Christianization of traditional naming ceremony (as distinct from baptism) among the Yoruba of Nigeria; and the Christianization of Igbo (Nigeria) patterns of passing through crises in life with adequate rites that heal or enhance relationship (*igba ndu*, ritual covenanting). Also in Central and East Africa afflictions by witches, evil men, and spirits may be resolved by participation in charismatic prayer that is widely diffused in this region and indeed all over Africa (Oborji 2008: 158ff).

However, the emergent liturgies of these areas are concentrating on the Eucharistic celebration and consecration of virgins. In West Africa, experiments geared towards celebration of the Feasts of *Corpus Christi* and Christ the King, are emerging. For instance, among the Ashanti of Ghana the *Corpus Christi* celebration is adapted to the *Odwira* festival (the yearly outing of the *Asantehene*, the Ashanti king). It is a ceremony suffused with color and meaning. The same emergence of the king has been integrated into rituals surrounding the consecration during the Eucharistic Prayer. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the same *Corpus Christi* festival is celebrated as *Ofala Jesu* (Jesus' annual outing as king) with fanfare, cannon shots, song and dance, etc. Another rather striking adaptation among the Igbo is the introduction of patterns of cooperative development

¹⁰ It received Vatican approval under the title: "*Le Missel Romain pour les diocèses du Zaire*" (cf. *Notitiae*, 24 (1988) 454-472).

or improvement unions into the rite of the “presentation of gifts” during the Eucharistic celebration. The most dramatic display of this kind of presentation of gifts is on Holy Thursday (Chrism Mass). It has become a fundraising strategy to ensure a self-reliant church. Offertory hymns are carefully worked to inspire participation (Uzukwu 1997: 270ff.).

All these efforts are accompanied also by theological reflections in the African local churches. The emergent theological concepts in Africa are expressions of the way in which Christians of the continent are trying to interpret the Christian message and to provide models taken from their own situation, their own culture and their own experience as a people for an African reading of the Christian mystery. The theological reflections are therefore efforts of evangelization. They reflect the commitment of African Christian theologians to relate the Christian message to the socio-cultural, religious political and economic reality of the continent. The main currents of African theology are: inculturation and liberation (human promotion), each with its own currents and cross-currents. In this context inculturation concerns discussion on the encounter of the gospel with African cultures. The theology dwells on the role of cultures in evangelization and studies ways of deepening the Christian faith in Africa. Liberation theology in Africa (which develops in its three main currents: 1) an African liberation theology developed in the early independent African countries; 2) African women liberation theology, developed as a reaction against the injustices women are subjected to in traditional society; and 3) South African liberation theology, born as a protest against racial ideology), concentrates on problems of poverty and social realities, on structures for creating political and economic stability and on the self-reliance of African local churches and society. This theology is attentive to the oppressive cultural effects of traditional and modern Africa, and to elements of racial and color discrimination.

To the credit of African theologians it must be said that among all aspects, Christology is the one that has received most attention, since the decisive element of every Christian life lies in the response that must be given to the question Christ asked: “Who do you (African Christians) say that I am?” (Mt 16:15) (cf. Appiah-Kubi – Torres 1979: viii). It is a well known fact that Christology is the most fundamental aspect of Christian theology. Therefore, every particular church must give its own explicit answer to this question, in a real contextual manner. A correct understanding of the person of Christ, of his nature, of his significance and of his message addressed to the human race, will help to make Christianity authentically planted in the African soil. Therefore, in recent times there have been many Christological models that come from the pens of African theologians. Christ is called the liberator, the ancestor, the first born son, the master of initiation, the healer, the African king, the African chief, the mediator, the savior, the give-of-life, the African lover, the all-powerful redeemer, etc ((Oborji 2006: 196ff.).

5. *The Post-Synod Africa and the Synod of 2009*

The fifth phase is the "post-Synod Africa." It is a period of hope which has also seen the celebration of the II Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa in 2009. This phase presents challenges and prospects for the young churches of Africa. At the first Synod in 1994, the African Bishops considered as realities of major concern the present situation of things in the continent and from there put forward a missionary ecclesiology of the “Church-as-Family of God” as a possibly guiding model of evangelization in the continent.

Therefore, in this phase of African mission, we meet a striking characteristic of the local churches in the continent, the attempt to view evangelization from the perspective of a missionary activity which aims at building up the church as the *family of God* on earth. This is an effort of the Africans to define the Christian community in terms which are perceptible to them and which are rooted in the gospel, Christian tradition and the cultural ingenuity of the people. The concern is about founding local churches which would express the profound Christian and African values of communion, fraternity, solidarity and peace. For in a truly African community or family, joys, difficulties and trials are shared in a trusting communitarian spirit and dialogue. The missionary activity *ad gentes* aims at formation and solidification of local churches. With the erection of many

dioceses in different parts of the continent, the African local churches are occupied with deepening the faith already received and of expounding its areas of influence and ministry throughout the local territory (John Paul II: *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 47). Thus, in the teaching of the African Bishops at the Synod, the relevant image of what evangelization is all about in the African context is seen in the building-up of the church as the family of God on earth. Evangelization invites humanity to participate in the very life of the Trinity, calling it to return, through the Son, in the Spirit, back to the Father “so that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15,28) (Synod of Bishops 1994: *Message*, no. 25).

Therefore, one of the most acclaimed achievements of the First Synod is this evaluation of the image of the church-as-family of God (an extended or universal “Family of God). It is the key for understanding and evaluating the documents of the Synod. It is an ecclesiology developed in the context of proclamation and evangelization with its inspiration generally from St Paul the great missionary. The inspiration is specifically from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians on reconciliation of the Jews and the gentiles with one another and with God (cf. Ephesians 2,11-22). The image of the church-as-family is a concept which Africans can easily appreciate and identify with, because of its African value of extended family, bound together by ancestral blood and community life. The communitarian accentuation of the family makes the new model a real African reading of Vatican II concept of the church as communion or as the people of God (cf. LG 3). It is an African cultural heritage which, if properly studied and applied, has many pastoral advantages especially for the African local churches. The Bishops invited African theologians to work out the theology of the church-as-family of God with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the church.

Then comes the II Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa in 2009. The full title of the Second Synod is: “The Church in Africa in service to Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:13, 14).” Drawing from this title and the documents of the synod itself, the Bishops at the Synod sessions held in Rome in 2009 discussed the theme of “Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace” - in the wider context of the present-day geopolitics, neo-colonialism, globalization, and the socio-economic and ethno-religious political factors that shape the contemporary African society. If the 1994 Synod provided the Church in Africa an opportunity for self-definition (of the Church-as-Family of God in Africa) and the self-awareness of its evangelizing mission as a church, the Second Synod of 2009 offered the same African Church another avenue for critical self-examination, to articulate in concrete terms, the scope and strategies of that mission of the Church-Family in the areas of promoting reconciliation, justice, and peace which are the most cogent challenges facing the continent today. Again, if the First Synod gave more attention to the question of inculturation, the Second Synod devoted most of its attention to social issues from the perspective of the social doctrines of the church. In other words, the Second Synod has proved to be a creative assembly of the African Bishops during which reflections were offered on the many ways the church can contribute to promoting reconciliation, justice and peace in a continent devastated by conflict of different forms and dimensions. The deliberations at the Second Synod provide a unique insight into the prospects and challenges for the Church in Africa today.

Put together, the two synods (1994 and 2009) have one thing in common. They both show the attention African local churches have started to give to the question of forging relationships between Africans of different ethnic groups, religious and cultural backgrounds sharing one community or nation. There is a pressing concern for the local churches to help in the strengthening and deepening the relationships among Africans of different groups and origins living in the same Christian community or parish and nation, and between them and people of other religions living in the same society. It is disturbing that Africans of diverse ethnic groups cannot stay together in one parish church or organization without rancor and suspicion of one another. In Africa, exaggerated ethnocentrism and intra-religious disturbances have continued to frustrate the on-going work of

evangelization and church formation in the continent. This situation affects both ecclesial and civil communities in Africa. The two synods have all addressed this problem. As John Paul II writes:

It has been rightly noted that, within the borders left behind by colonial powers, the co-existence of ethnic groups with different traditions, languages, and even religions often meets obstacles arising from serious mutual hostility. Tribal oppositions at times endanger if not peace, at least the pursuit of the common good of the society. They create difficulties for the life of the churches and the acceptance of pastors from other ethnic groups. This is why the church in Africa feels challenged by the specific responsibility of healing these divisions (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 49).

In his own teaching at the end of the Second Synod, Benedict XVI emphasized the importance of conversion of heart as an essential path for building a society of reconciliation, peace and justice. In short, Benedict XVI speaks of a spirituality of reconciliation and communion for the African churches:

Reconciliation is not an isolated act but a lengthy process by which all parties are reestablished in love – a love that heals through the working of God’s word. Reconciliation then becomes at once a way of life and a mission. In order to arrive at genuine reconciliation and to live out the spirituality of communion that flows from it, the Church needs witnesses who are profoundly rooted in Christ and find nourishment in his word and the sacraments (Benedict XVI 2011: *Africae Munus*, no. 34).

Therefore, one of the privileged areas of concern in missionary efforts in Africa today is about building the relationship in Christian communities in various local churches. It is creating Christian communities that are pluralistic, non-discriminating, loving and welcoming. In this way African local churches would become models for deepening the relationship in a mixed environment. To achieve this, the two synods seemed to agree on one fact, namely, that missionary activity in Africa today is challenged to encourage authentic formation of agents of evangelization and church formations that have common goal of assisting African Christians towards becoming witnesses of authentic Christian conversion, reconciliation, justice and peace, and of overcoming the menace of exaggerated ethnicity and intra-religious hatred (cf. Benedict XVI 2011: *Africae Munus*, no. 163).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can say that our elaborate analysis of the phases of evangelization of Africa has revealed two obvious facts in relation to the main purpose of this study. Firstly, we noticed that Africa is full of hopes and promises for Christianity. For example, at a time when some parts of the world are experiencing rapid de-Christianization under the influence of secularization, the African churches are growing annually in numerical strength. Besides, there is a noticeable development among Africans to assume responsibility for the work of evangelization in their local churches.

Secondly, we discovered that apart from the Alexandrian school, that veritable power house of theologies and theologians (of the early Church in North Africa), the Church in Africa has to wait until mid-twentieth century before we could talk of renewed theological reflection from an African perspective. While the former was the affair of African Christians from the Mediterranean zone, the latter consists in the pre-occupations and labors of the newly evangelized sub-Saharan Africans.

Finally, the state of mission in Africa as presented here may appear very simplistic to an outsider. However, for the African Christians, particularly, pastors and theologians, it is not as simple as that. The whole issue of salvation and God's love for his children is involved (cf. Kalilombe 1981: 66). In fact, today, the Church in Africa is faced with different problems from

those which face most churches in Europe, America or elsewhere; problems which foreign theology or missionary model can provide no relevant ready-made answers. Africans are attempting to grapple with these problems, and to relate the Gospel to the practical issues, whether social and political, or cultural and liturgical, which confront them.

Furthermore, as the last two synods on the continent have shown, building a self-reliant church in Africa also rests principally, on liberating the people from the incident of primitive ethnicity, religious and cultural hatred that disturb them in their various situations in different African nations. To be true Disciples of Christ, African Christians have to over-grow exaggerated ethnicity and hatred. It is only in this way that they can creditably launch out to the task of evangelization of their people and others. Thus, as Popes John Paul II said, in the African context, the new evangelization will aim at building up the church-as-family, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between ethnic groups, favoring solidarity and sharing of personnel and resources among the particular churches, without undue ethnic considerations (cf. John Paul II 1995: *Ecclesia in Africa* 63;). Making the same point, Pope Benedict XVI, in the post-synodal exhortation, *Africae Munus*, says:

Since the vocation of all men and women is one, we must not lose our zest for the reconciliation of humanity with God through the mystery of our salvation in Christ. Our redemption is the reason for the confidence and the firmness of our hope, “by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be loved and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey” (*Africae Munus*, no. 172; see also Benedict XVI 2007: *Spe Salvi*, no. 1).

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