

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAJOR CHANGES IN THE VATICAN TOWARDS CREATING WORLD CHRISTIANITY: A REFLECTION ON EMERGING AFRICAN CATHOLICISM

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ABSTRACT

Even though the presence of Africans at Vatican II was marginal (only 61 African delegates), its impact on the African Church was tremendous. Vatican II not only opened the door of the Catholic Church for fresh air to come in, but it also impacted the African church significantly, leading to the emergence of African Catholicism. African Catholicism has become a major contributor to World Christianity. A field of study that looks at the phasing out of Christendom and the emergence of diverse forms of Christianity globally.

KEYWORDS: Vatican II, World Christianity, African Catholicism, and African Synod.

INTRODUCTION

The Vatican II meetings have been described as the “most important church councils in modern history” (Hill 434). The Council was enunciated by Pope John XXIII (1881-1963), a few months after his election. He was 77 when he was elected; no one thought that at his age he would bring fresh ideas into the church. His immense reasoning ability shocked the world. Vatican II was a continuation of Vatican I with new initiatives that were never thought of. The meetings began in 1962 and went on till 1965 with a total of more than 3,000 delegates “from all over the world...the largest church council in history, ten times larger than Nicaea...” (Hill 434). The point being made in this paper is that Vatican II did not only usher the Catholic Church into the modern world, as John XXIII’s famous dictum goes, ‘opening the windows of the Catholic Church that fresh air may enter’ (Qtd in Dagin 41); it, in fact, transformed the church from being a monolithic institution to being a diverse one. It has been reported that the presence of Africa in the Council was minimal (8 percent of the bishops that attended), which meant the voice of Africa was faint. But the outcomes of the Council changed the Catholic Church in Africa. It had only one spokesman, Cardinal L. Rugambwa (Kalilombe 310). Kalilombe tells us that the focus of the Council was “the concerns of the Churches of Europe and America in the 1960s” (310). It was basically

an attempt to respond to the challenges of Western modernity. As such, the impact of the Council's deliberation on Africa was incidental. The Vatican City remained the headquarters of the church, but Vatican II allowed Catholic churches worldwide to reflect the cultural imprints of their local environments, a process known as inculturation, thereby creating unity in diversity within the church. This is what missiologists, anthropologists, and church historians call World Christianity. World Christianity is the study of global Christianity in its plural form, as against the study of Christianity as a global spread of Western faith seen in the works of scholars as Kenneth Scott Latourette. The former perspective allows for indigenous initiative; the latter studies the adjustments made in non-Western societies in adopting Western Christianity.

THE CONCEPT, WORLD CHRISTIANITY

'World Christianity' is a term that technically was what was known as mission studies or missiology. World Christianity means more than that. It is "the study of diverse local expression of Christianity as well as transnational and transcultural comparisons, connections, and networks across geographical, denominational, and religious boundaries" (Pui-Lan and Zurlo 76). As Dale Irvin has argued, World Christianity "has multiple origins and represents a confluence of interests... its origins lie in the ecumenical movement and, more specifically, 'the search for unity, mission, and interreligious dialogue'" (Qtd in Kim 45). World Christianity draws from various fields, "mission history; cultural anthropology and area studies; ecumenism and intercultural theology; studies of globalization and development; religious studies; and post- or de-colonial studies that aim to decentre the West in theology" (Kim 46). The observers of trends that have happened to Christianity across the globe, moving from Euro-centric Christianity dubbed Christendom to culturally sensitive Christianity called World Christianity, are many. A few pioneers include scholars such as Andrew F. Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Kwame Bediako, Brian Stanley, Adrian Hastings, and Philip Jenkins, among many. This group of scholars created a forum called the Yale-Edinburgh Group or Conference for collaboration in the study of World Christianity globally.

VATICAN II AND THE AFRICAN SYNODS: PATH TO AFRICANISATION OF CATHOLICISM

Vatican II has been described as the opening of the Catholic Church to fresh air. But as Francis A. Oborji has observed that Vatican II provided the avenue for the church to be relevant to local communities throughout the world. He writes, it marked "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” (Bevans 15). This impetus came from Vatican II’s missiology that saw “local churches as agents of mission in their territories” (Bevans 15). Although the presence of Africans at the Vatican Council was negligible (out of 260 prelates that represented Africa, only 61 were Africans; the rest were Westerners), the conclusions made at the Council significantly impacted the Catholic church in Africa.

The first step in the application of the vision of Vatican II with respect to Africa was the African Synod. Convened first in Rome in 1994 (where over 200 cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and priests attended), then later at Yaoundé, Cameroon, in September 1995. The sessions of the Africa Synod were presided over by the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who travelled to Cameroon to play that function (Sanneh 277). Sanneh asserts that the Synod “was a major step in applying the statements of Vatican II to Africa” (277). It was Africa’s Church Council (Sundkler and Steed 1023). The Synod “affirmed that the church was in Africa, this time not to dominate and confiscate [unlike the colonisers of the 19th century], but to share and replenish. It was a time of restitution and restoration” (Sanneh 278). It added that the African church was “a local faith community that was indigenously led and as such committed to engagement with Africa’s critical development needs.” The Synod noted Africa’s “human potentials which would contribute to global solidarity for peace, justice, and opportunity” (Sanneh 278). It called for the African church to reinvent itself instead of being tied to “preexisting European structures and institutions” (Sanneh 278). Such that there could emerge an African Catholicism.

Laudable as these aspirations were, they required the concerted efforts of the African bishops to achieve them, given the numerous problems Africa faced, be it social, economic, health, political, and so on. One way of achieving these goals was through fostering partnership and cooperation among Catholic churches in Africa. Hence, the birth of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), which was followed by a continental body, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in 1969. At the inauguration of the continental Conference in Kampala, Pope Paul VI gave a significant admonition, “[y]ou can and you must have an African Christianity... Now you Africans are your own missionaries, with an indigenous apostolate totally your own” (Sundkler and Steed 1018). At this time, one concern was the independence of African countries still under colonial control. These countries were Zimbabwe, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, Sao Tome and Principe, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Comoros, and Djibouti. The other problem was how to develop “real national unity out of diverse tribes, ethnic groups, and regional interest” (Kalilombe 311). There was the issue of over-dependence of African countries on their foreign masters politically and

economically, and thus increasingly yielding themselves to manipulations of neocolonialism. But more important was the level of corruption and mismanagement of resources by African leaders, which was ruining the prospects that came with independence. These matters were not limited to African states, but the church had its share. A major one was the transition from “missionary-guided Church to a self-determining local church.” This dilemma divided the Catholic Church in Africa into two. Some were comfortable with sticking to the mother Church – a fidelity to Rome that would guarantee continuation of orthodoxy and traditional ecclesiastical identity and support. The other looked forward to the possibility of localisation, decentralisation, and inculturation, which Vatican II, from its documents, seemed to encourage. The latter was not meant to lead to sectarianism but “pluriformity” (Kalilombe 312). Then there was the matter of the relationship between the Church and Islam. These were some of the issues that the regional and continental bodies of the Church were to wrestle with.

THE IMPACT OF VATICAN II ON AFRICAN CATHOLICISM AND WORLD CHRISTIANITY

SECAM led the way by organising the Special Synod to meet the need for an African Council which would discuss the myriad problems facing the church in Africa. Due to the importance of the Synod for African Catholicism, it took five years to prepare for it. This was meant to replicate in Africa the impact CELAM was making on the Latin American Church since 1968. Structurally, the Catholic church in Africa was “to grow into a similar shape and to function in the same way as the original prototype, in this case, the Western Catholic Church” (Kalilombe 313). However, with inculturation, the African Catholicism was expected “to take the shape of traditional religious expressions”, particularly in building its teaching by integrating it with “fundamental values from [African] traditional culture, so that present and future generations can build a meaningful way of life on a valid African foundation” (Kalilombe 314). The cultural background goes beyond traditional religion and culture; it includes relations with Islam, ecological degradation, poverty, and under-development.

SECAM had come up with a response to Vatican II in relation to Africa’s challenges, especially in evangelisation, which were articulated during the African Synod, as it is summarised by Chukwuma Okoye (27ff).

1. The Synod addressed the issue of the family, a critical aspect of African life. It submitted that the church was the family. It asserted that “[t]he waters of baptism must show themselves thicker than the bonds of blood” (Okoye 29). This is a herculean task given African multi-ethnic and ‘tribal’ groups.

2. The Synod discouraged the perpetuation of passive laity. It stated that, “[a]ll pastors are invited to develop a pastoral programme in which the laity rediscover their proper place and importance.” To be able to support the ministry of the priest and religious lay members, men and women are provided with “adequate training, including theology and sacred scripture, areas very often reserved for the clergy.”
3. The Synod considered the Bible as the first catechism. As such, the Bible should be put in “the hands of the faithful from their earliest years, to cater for Bible translations into the local languages and to design celebrations of the word.” It encouraged reading the Bible by the evangelizer and the evangelized.
4. Mission is proclaiming the message of love to non-Christians, then forming Christian communities and animating churches planted toward further mission both “ad intra and ad extra.”
5. Inculturation should be preaching a Christ who helps the Africans to “discover their own...personality.” Inculturation requires a fidelity to traditional values, a fidelity to Christ and his message, and a fidelity to holiness.
6. The Synod encouraged dialogue within the local church, dialogue between denominations in Africa, and dialogue with non-Christian faiths. Among non-Christian religious groups, Islam presents a unique situation because of its divisive nature. Therefore, it urged that “a distinction is to be made between Islam and Muslim and that fundamentalist Muslims are a minority which is as much a headache to the majority of Muslims as to Christians.” So, it encouraged more dialogue with moderate Muslims who share many things in common with the church, e.g., in the areas of morality and human rights.
7. It then called on the Catholic church in Africa to work hard in uniting all believers in Christ, a unity that Christ himself prayed for. This explains the active promotion of ecumenism by the Catholic church in Nigeria, as seen in its role in the Christian Association of Nigeria, founded in 1976 in the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos, Nigeria.
8. It called on Catholic bishops in Africa to work hard to raise self-sufficient dioceses so that they do not remain “perpetual beggars” and thereby gain the respect of the global church. In this way, the African Church can speak the truth to the world without fear or favour.

The impact of Vatican II on the Catholic church in Africa was to lead it to “come to terms with the implications of Third Wave Christian resurgence”. To be able to do that, it was reasoned that the Catholic church in Africa should not be “absorbed into preexisting European structures and institutions; instead, the church must reinvent itself to respond to changes in the former mission fields” (Sanneh 278). This would imply recognising the need to localise the church, such that the Catholic church becomes a

united church, but with plural expressions. This is the concern of current studies on World Christianity.

Another impact was the massive training of African priests. Between 1967 and 1988, there was an exponential increase in the number of ordinations from 102 in 1967 to 518 in 1988 (Sundkler and Steed 1022). Most of the ordinands were in their twenties – an indication of the vagarious nature of the Catholic church in Africa. This was to meet the need to make the local churches in Africa “primary agents of mission in their territories” (Oborji 16). Africa needs this missionary dynamism and needs the Good News proclaimed, especially given the myriad challenges the continent faces, and so one may be led to ask:

In a continent full of bad news, how is the Christian message ‘Good News’...?
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. Africa is in dire need of the gospel message, for through the gospel God builds up his family (Oborji 16).

To make the gospel understood by the person on the street, the church advocated for an evangelisation that is based on the localisation or contextualisation, or inculturation of the teaching of the church. One of the areas that began to be enculturated was the liturgy. Other areas included theologies, spiritualities, and morals. There were attempts to Africanise the liturgies by the use of African language, rhythm, idioms, colour, and “happy participation, claiming Africa’s right to be different” (Sundkler and Steed 1022). Take a Kenyan new eucharistic prayer, for example:

Priest: O Father Great Elder, we have no words to thank you.

Congregation: Listen to us, aged God
Listen to us, ancient God
Who has ears
Look at us, aged God
Ancient God
Who has eyes
Receive us, aged God
Who has hands.

The mass itself is taking an African coloration, like the Zairean rite, the Mass of the Lagune, the Mass of the Savana, the Ndzon-Melen Mass in Yaounde. Concerning the Yaounde Mass, Uzukwu writes:

The second part of the liturgy is dominated by joy – dancing and singing. This joy bursts out with the Offertory procession whose colour and brilliance lends itself...to the image of a celestial liturgy. As the Sanctus, designated young maidens surround the altar to wait the bridegroom; they are joined by the choir

after consecration and all sing the hymn of praise, Gloria, to welcome Emmanuel (Sundkler and Steed 1022).

In Congo Brazzaville, a traditional song, Laari, was adopted in the celebration of the Mass at the All-Saints celebration:

E-e-e weep over me my brothers,
But be not contented only with weeping
Pray for me.
I am (getting) ready to appear before God's throne,
I do not know what is in store (for me) there,
Do you understand brothers?
Weep for me brother (E-e-e...). (Sundkler and Steed 1023).

In West Africa, church celebrations have taken an African flavour as well. For instance, some Catholic churches in West Africa have adapted the traditional initiation rites, especially transition rites, like "the Moore ritual in the diocese of Diebougou, Bourkina Faso" (Oborji 18); the Christianisation of the traditional naming ceremony among Yoruba Catholics and the rites for healing broken relationships called *iba ndu* among Igbos, both in Nigeria. Oborji adds that "in Central and East Africa afflictions by witches, evil men, and spirits may be resolved by participating in charismatic prayer that is widely diffused in this region and indeed all over Africa" (18). Among the Ashanti of Ghana, "Corpus Christi celebration is adapted to the *Odwira* festival (the yearly outing of the Asantehene, the Ashanti King)" (Oborji 18). This event has also been "integrated into rituals surrounding the words of institution during the Eucharistic Prayer." Similarly, this church celebration is being celebrated as *Ofala Jesu* (Jesus' annual outing as king) amongst the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. The Igbo faithful process with lots of fanfare, "cannon shots, and song and dance" (Oborji 18). Oborji has provided a further interesting feature of this adaptation in Igbo land:

...the introduction of patterns of cooperative development 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 (18).

Catholic theologians are paying attention to the theological inculturation by adapting some of the methods fashioned by their Protestant colleagues. For example, apart from inculturation, there are areas like liberation theologies, namely the African liberation theology as a tool for the struggle for decolonisation; women's liberation theology to address injustice to women, and the South African liberation theology or black theology as a protest against racial injustice. Catholic theologians have paid attention to Christology in Africa with an attempt to find out who Jesus was/is to them (See, for example, Nyamiti, *Christ our Ancestor*; Nyamiti, "Jesus Christ, the Ancestor

of Humankind”). On ancestorship in African Christianity, Walls argues, “[p]erhaps a richer theology of the family, one that has a place for the ancestors, will come as a richer family reality of Africa and Asia than the atomized one of modernity. African Christianity may help us to reflect more on the implications of the Lord’s words about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living”, in Luke 20:37-38 (48). He submits that ‘ancestor’ Christology may not be meaningful to a Western theologian because he “does not have the family structures that raise the question” (69). The matter of the nature of Christ as a person and in our lives is important to theologians because, as Oborji says, “[i]t is a well-known fact that Christology is the most fundamental aspect of Christian theology” (19).

After the First Synod in 1994, there was the Second Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa in 2009, which was held in Rome. The Synod’s theme was looking at ‘The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.’ This theme was inspired by the biblical injunction, ‘You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world’ (Matt. 5:13-14). The First Synod looked at the Church as a family, the Second Synod “offered the same African Church another avenue for critical self-examination, to articulate in concrete terms the scope and strategies of the mission of the church family in the areas of promoting reconciliation, justice, and peace which are the most cogent challenges facing the continent today” (Oborji 21). The First Synod was concerned about inculturation, the Second Synod paid attention to “social issues from the perspectives of the social doctrines of the church” (Oborji 21). In other words, the Second Synod paid more attention to the way the church can bring reconciliation, justice, and peace to a continent that is ravaged by violent communal clashes, banditry, genocide, and war. Some of these conflicts are caused by ethnic, economic, and religious divisiveness and inequality. The alarming thing is that this rancour can exist even in a congregation/parish in Africa. Thus, the Synod urged for the “conversion of the heart as an essential path for building a society of reconciliation, peace and justice.” The church should therefore pursue two conversions: conversion to reconcile to God and a conversion to reconcile to one another as members of the family of God. The Church in Africa would, as a result, be able to help in bringing healing to the affliction the continent has experienced because of protracted conflicts.

CONCLUSION

When Pope Paul VI, while in Kampala for the concretion of twelve African bishops in 1969 said, “You can and you must have an African Christianity...Now you Africans are your own missionaries, with an indigenous apostolate totally your own” he was re-echoing the call for an African indigenous church made by the then honorary secretary of the Church Missionary Society, Henry Venn in 1851. Venn had described

the emergence of an indigenous church as the “ultimate object” of Western missionary work in Africa. He submitted that:

...the ultimate object of a mission, viewed under its ecclesiastical aspect, to be the settlement of a native Church, under native pastors, upon a self-supporting system, it should be borne in mind that the progress of a mission mainly depends upon the training up and the location of native pastors; and that, as it has been happily expressed, “the euthanasia of a mission” takes place when a missionary, surrounded by well-trained native congregations, under native pastors, can resign all pastoral work into their hands, and gradually to relax his superintendence over the pastors themselves, till it insensibly ceases; and so the missionary passes into a settled Christian community. Then the missionary and all missionary agencies should be transferred to ‘regions beyond’ (Shenk 119-20).

This call by Pope Paul VI was for the creation of an African Catholicism that is a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating church. That is, the African church is to serve as “the primary agent of mission” (Orborji 16).

As I have shown above, the African Catholic Church has achieved these goals, not only through its growth (by cashing in on the opportunity of Christian resurgence) but its influence is felt in the development of African theology, towards which the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) was established in 1976 (Kalilombe 314), and the growth of the African clergy. It is also making great contributions to national development in the social sphere, especially in the promotion of social, economic justice, and the struggle for human rights in Africa. African Catholicism is not a replica of “preexisting European structure and institutions” (Sanneh 278), but rather a re-invention of the church in Africa to meet African needs.

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