

## THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN CHURCH

- Joseph Ogbonnaya

The contemporary African scene paints a gloomy picture of 'failed' states, marred by chaos and anarchy, corruption and greed, hyper-inflationary trends, poverty and disease, ethnic rivalries and religious conflicts. Yet Christianity is growing rapidly in Africa. According to the "Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2003" in 1978 Catholics numbered about 55 million (12.4% of the African population) while in 2003 they have increased to almost 144 million (17% 25 years later). The true but sad contradictory reality in the growth of Christianity in Africa is the African condition of poverty, penury and want. In the words of a renowned Kenyan author George Kinoti:

Experts tell us that Christianity is growing faster in Africa than on any other continent, at the same time the people are rapidly becoming poor and the moral and the social fabrics of society are disintegrating. Christianity is not making a significant difference to African nations. Why should this be so? The main reason is that we... failed to apply the Gospel to the whole life and limited it to spiritual life only. We read the scriptures selectively, placing emphasis on those (verses) that talked about salvation and neglecting those that talked about justice and material well being.<sup>i</sup>

While one may not agree with Kinoti's conclusion, the fact remains that the African Church cannot remain aloof to or pretend not to know the afflictions, the pains, and the struggles of the people without being deemed suspect or irrelevant, or even been seen as part of the forces oppressing the people. The Church that should be a conscience of the society ought to help guide the continent and serve as an agent of social transformation and reconciliation. The Church cannot abandon this duty or shy away from it out of fear without contradicting its nature as the assembly of the people of God, charged with the responsibility of developing the temporal order, without becoming irrelevant to the people. As Julius Nyerere the former President of Tanzania said, the relevance of the Church depends on her involvement in effecting changes in the social structures that condemn humankind to poverty:

...Unless we participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men to poverty, humiliation and degradation, then the Church will become irrelevant to man and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. Unless the Church, its members and its organizations, express God's love for man by involvement in the present conditions of man, then it will become identified with injustice and persecution. If this happens, it will die- and, humanly speaking, deserve to die – because it will then serve no purpose comprehensible to modern man.<sup>ii</sup>

Although the Church exists as a sacrament<sup>iii</sup> to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God and to accomplish the salvation of humankind, yet she cannot do this without

paying attention to the well-being of human beings in the world. As the document for the engagement of the Church in the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*) clarifies: the Church fulfills its mission “in the way it heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, in the way it consolidates society, and endows the daily activities of men [and women] with a deeper sense of meaning.”<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, the African Church must face more seriously both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of her apostolate as is intrinsic in its nature as a Church. One is reminded here of the beautiful words of the bishops of the world in the Synodal document *Justice in the World (JW)* of 1971:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.<sup>v</sup>

Thus the future of the African Church depends on the integration of genuine Christian spirituality with a balanced sense of social justice.

By “genuine Christian spirituality”, we refer to an integral Christian spirituality that strikes a balance between personal piety and social action. It is the type of Christianity that enables Christians to integrate their faith in their civic engagement with their world. According to Donal Dorr,<sup>vi</sup> this involves a religious conversion in terms of a personal relationship with God, moral conversion in the sense of being genuinely interested in other people and political conversion which involves some understanding of how society works and a commitment to correcting injustices. A genuine Christian spirituality does not create a dichotomy of faith and life; on the contrary it makes one realize the social implications of one’s religious life and action. Genuine Christian spirituality is a response to the modern privatization of Christianity; that is, the prevalent tendency to assume that Christianity can be important to one’s individual life without having any impact in the public life of the society. It allows a person of faith see the relationship of his/her religious convictions to other aspects of life: social, civic, economic, political and cultural. Thus one cannot claim to be a good Christian, attend Mass regularly for instance, and yet loot the public treasury, be guilty of corruption, inflict or support political repression, or be unjust.

## **SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE**

By way of explanation, it is good to note that the early missionary activities in Africa had created a dichotomy between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’, between the ‘Church and the World, between personal piety and socio-political life. It emphasized the former, i.e. heaven and not the latter - our material well-being as what matters for the Christian. So they left as a spiritual legacy what we might call “*fuga mundi*” (flight from the world) - escapist spirituality for African Christians. As Justin Ukpon, an African Biblical scholar observed:

It is considered that the business of the Church is the salvation of individual souls and not engagement in economic and political matters. This posture also affected

the way the Bible was read and interpreted. The Bible was given a spiritualized interpretation, and was read for the nourishment of individual souls towards spiritual salvation and not in view of societal transformation.<sup>vii</sup>

Consequent upon this one-dimensional spirituality, which negates the indigenous African religious world view that emphasizes the integral salvation of the whole person; many Africans up to now hardly relate their Christian life to their daily life. In the practice of their Christian faith, Africans live lives of double standard with the subconscious depth of their indigenous society and religion exerting great influence on them. On account of the *fuga mundi* spirituality they inherited, which introduced dualism into their religious life, they dichotomize the sacred and the profane, consider politics and economics outside the sphere of religion and thus separate their Christian faith from their daily life. Some even see poverty arising from structural injustice as one of those sufferings a Christian, while in the world, ought to endure in order to go to heaven, and as punishment for sins. Such understanding of Christian faith and practice is partly responsible for the present apathy of African Christians to issues of social justice in Africa. According to Patrick Ryan:

Traditional [Christian] spirituality promoted a rather individualistic as opposed to a social approach to faith. This enabled us actually to evade responsibility for earthly affairs. It discouraged us from working for social change and encouraged us to support the given order of society.<sup>viii</sup>

Furthermore because such compartmentalization of life is not part of their indigenous religious culture, the average African Christian is confused. Syncretism, plural belongings, constant change from one Christian denomination to another, credulous quest for healings and miracles, backsliding, nonchalant attitude to socio-political life etc. characterize Christian life and practice in Africa.

Christian spirituality today especially after Vatican II emphasizes not only personal relationship with God, but also one's interpersonal relationship with other people; as well as the active involvement of Christians in the overall progress of the human society. The document *Gaudium et Spes* in unmistakable terms states that our heavenly destiny does not entitle us to "shirk our earthly responsibilities" but to transform the world we live by our witness of Christian living:

They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibility...Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide off the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life... The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties towards his neighbour and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation.<sup>ix</sup>

The spirituality of Vatican II while maintaining the Church's doctrine of Christian eschatology shifts away from the other-worldly approach of the *fuga mundi* spirituality to understand eschatology as the doctrine of Christian hope. And this means according to Karl Rahner that "every structure of secular life, whether present *or still to come* on the future, is called in question by hope as that in which we grasp at the incalculable and uncontrollable, and in the process of being called in question, the act of hope is made real in historical and social terms."<sup>x</sup> Genuine Christian spirituality as espoused by Vatican II gives rise to commitment to justice, mutuality and reciprocity in interpersonal relationships and a Christians' personal relationship with God.

The spirituality of Vatican II thus poses a great challenge to the African Church to make the necessary but difficult leap in its spirituality. The dichotomy often created between the public and private life should no longer be the case in morally converted Christians. They should witness to Christ through their lives; their spirituality can only be real when it is manifest in their active lives through effective participation in the socio-political life of their various societies. In order to achieve this, the method of catechesis should change to integrate faith and life. Pastors should intensify the formation of Christian conscience beyond the external show of pious religiosity to create an integral Christian spirituality. African Church leaders should hold and defend the truth as sacred, oppose structural injustices and cry out unrestrainedly; pointing out the difficulties the various political establishments throw Africans into. They should spiritually defy the present African situation; look forward into a prospective future for the continent and incarnate the Christian faith to the culture and life of the Africans.

## **INCARNATING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH**

In order to achieve an integral Christian spirituality, one that integrates faith and life, contemplation and action, piety and commitment to social justice, the African Church ought to make up for the absence of the incarnation of Christian faith in the life of the people. Evidently what is problematic in the African Church is either a wrong interpretation of Christian faith that neglects the reality of the socio-historical, political and cultural life of the people and/or an absence of such interpretation completely. The heaven-bound *fuga mundi* spirituality accounts for the former while the inadequate incarnation of Christian faith in the religious and cultural life of the people accounts for the latter. Such absence and misinterpretation makes mutual interaction between Christian faith and the culture of the African people difficult. Christian values are neither made to animate the people's way of life nor interpreted in the light of the people's culture. Consequently Christianity is often regarded as a foreign religion as it does not penetrate sufficiently into the deep religiosity of Africans. J.S. Mbiti's observation is true:

Mission Christianity has come to mean for many Africans simply a set of rules to be observed, promises to be expected in the next world, rhythmless hymns to be sung, rituals to be followed and a few other outward things. It is a Christianity which is locked up six days a week, meeting only for two hours on Sundays and perhaps once during the week. It is a Christianity which is active in a church

building. The rest of the week is empty. Africans, who traditionally do not know religious vacuum, feel that they don't get enough religion from this type of Christianity, since it does not fill up their whole life and their understanding of the universe.<sup>xi</sup>

One would have expected much changes since Mbiti wrote over thirty years ago. But unfortunately although there has been a lot of talk in many quarters about inculturation and "almost a general agreement...that African Christian theology should be an inculturation theology",<sup>xii</sup> apart from a few minute changes here and there, like the use of the vernacular, local instruments and indigenous hymns which often have the *fuga mundi spiritual* slant,<sup>xiii</sup> the process of inculturating the Christian faith has been rather too slow. Cultural problems are still handled as they were by the missionaries over a century ago. There are blanket condemnations of rich cultural values and practices without proper investigation. Members of the clergy set up ad hoc committees to adjudicate cultural issues they do not understand. Peculiar African perspectives that deal with the spirit world like the ancestor worship, witchcraft, water spirit cult phenomenon, etc. are either swept under carpet as if they do not exist or are treated as neurotic or schizophrenic in a Eurocentric manner. Cultural institutions like masquerading, marriage and title taking are not treated any differently. Masquerading is banned as an evil cult, indigenous cultural titles are condemned as tainted with evil on account of certain sacrifices associated with them, and some marriages contracted validly in the customs and traditions of the people are declared invalid. Little wonder today many people, especially among the educated elites, discard Christianity while a good number mix their faith with their traditional religious beliefs and practices. Emmanuel Nwaoru thus rightly observed: "Today a good number of Christians, including the elite and the 'leading class', still appear to be untouched by the Gospel message in their illicit Christian beliefs and practices."<sup>xiv</sup>

The problem with inculturation in the African Church is not so much its imperativeness but both the criteria of what is authentic and inauthentic inculturation and which body will make the judgment.<sup>xv</sup> As a result of this and perhaps other factors, the Church has not moved from the level of theory to the practice of inculturation. As J. Obi Oguejiofor observed: "The problem with inculturation today is the gap between theory and practice."<sup>xvi</sup> John E. Anyanwu further notes: "There is far too much talk about 'Africanization', 'Incarnation', 'Indigenization', 'Inculturation' of the Church in Africa but so far, too little about the opportunities; and common place situations are hardly used."<sup>xvii</sup>

Since "it takes time to evaluate inculturation",<sup>xviii</sup> because it "is a slow journey"<sup>xix</sup> as Pope John Paul II noted, must the African Church wait until it gets approval from the Vatican before it begins to incarnate the Christian faith in the life and culture of its peoples? Is the official encouragement of the Second Vatican Council to the young Churches to "borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their peoples everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life"<sup>xx</sup> not enough authorization for the African Church to begin the practice of inculturation? I think it is time the African Church hierarchy heed the passionate appeal of Msgr. M. Maduka:

Much has been said and written! But it is DOING, ACTION that changes the face of the world. It is indeed overdue to bring the good things of Africa, our way of life, into the Church. It is a task that must be done! ...Let us see and DO or ACT. Tomorrow is too late!<sup>xxi</sup>

Tomorrow is too late indeed. The astronomical increase in the departure of Christians of the mainline churches to the New Religious Movements and Pentecostal Churches, which have gone far in the practice of inculturation shows that something must be done and quickly too.

Several values of African Traditional Religion could receive expression in the Christian faith.<sup>xxii</sup> Such values as itemized by Pope Paul VI could be worth considering. "These include the spiritual view of life, the sense of God, respect for human dignity, the sense of the family, the role of the father as mediator between God, the ancestors and his family, and finally, initiation into community life."<sup>xxiii</sup> In a letter of 25 March 1988 mandating the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar to include the study of African Traditional Religion in the seminary curriculum, the then President of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions Francis Cardinal Arinze cited six of these cultural values to include: "sense of the sacred, respect for life, sense of community, family, spiritual vision of life, authority as sacred and symbolism in religious worship"<sup>xxiv</sup> If we isolate the sense of the sacred for instance, we see that viewed in its totality, for the African, the entire cosmos, visible and invisible, is sacred in its relationship to the unique wholeness of God the creator. On account of this, life itself is sacred and respected, the family is sacred because it promotes life and reflects wholeness in unity of being. This sense of the sacred incorporates also the highest moral virtues required for an excellence of life. Thus A. N.O Ekwunife remarks: "The sense of the sacred for the Africans is not only associated with power. It is associated with the highest values in human life – honesty, justice, gentleness, patience, endurance, perseverance, sincerity in one's word and so on. A sacred person is expected to mirror these values."<sup>xxv</sup> On this sense of the sacred the African sense of justice is founded. Specifying with the Igbos of Southern Nigeria, A. N. O Ekwunife explains what justice (*Ikwuba aka oto* - literally keeping one's hands straight) means. "The straight hand is a metaphoric way of saying 'Say the truth without fear or favour; give to everyone what s/he is supposed to have; maintain fair relationship with your neighbour; never tilt the balance in ontological relationships and so on'. "<sup>xxvi</sup> The sense of the sacred can thus create in Africans a consciousness of justice. The *fuga mundi* spirituality distorted this sense of justice by its one dimensional emphasis on the soul and denigration of the body, the material world, with the African world view as evil and unimportant for salvation. This makes African Christians leave acts of injustice to God whom they believe will reward each one as his conduct deserves on the last day.<sup>xxvii</sup>

So integration of these African cultural and religious values which in themselves are in consonance with the Gospel values of love, justice and peace into Christian faith could help restore in the African Christians their acute sense of justice. What this means in the search for social justice is that as people begin to accept and reconcile their faith with their culture, Christian faith and love can take root in the whole life of the people.

Christian faith could become a transforming force through which people can overcome the otherworldly spirituality that prevents them in large part from seeing social injustice as something they should fight to change. This could go a long way towards sensitizing people on the importance of overcoming poverty, fighting the culture of corruption and holding their leaders accountable for use of the nation's resources. This could be so because inculturation is a powerful factor in the struggle for justice. As Peter Schineller warns:

Since inculturation is inevitably linked with the struggle for justice, it will at times be a challenge to the ruling powers. Inculturation grapples with the issue of the religious culture of people in the face of the Christian faith, as well as the major questions of poverty, injustice, marginalization in our world...Much resistance will come to a prophetic voice when it addresses these issues and tries to inculturate Christian faith in a sinful, often unjust world. Persecution and rejection are marks of the true Church, the church that is trying to inculturate gospel values of justice and peace in a world that is often unjust and violent.<sup>xxviii</sup>

The African Church must urgently inculturate these rich cultural values that express the Good News in the indigenous life of Africans. In the formation of candidates for the priesthood and religious life, the study of the traditional religions of Africans must be taken much more seriously in order to acquaint the primary agents of evangelization with the requisite knowledge of the culture within which they will actually work as priests and religious. The Church hierarchy must listen more to the teeming populations of Christians entrusted onto them. For only in this way can they know them and appreciate more the culture and historical conditions of their people and be disposed to enter into dialogue with the traditional religions of the people. Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, Secretary Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, underlines the importance of listening for any meaningful inculturation thus:

Inculturation begins by listening, which means getting to know those to whom we proclaim the Gospel. Listening and knowing lead to a more adequate discernment of the values and counter values of their cultures in the light of the Paschal Mystery of death and Life.<sup>xxix</sup>

The voices in the African Church urgently call for the practice of inculturation. These voices ought to be listened to and heeded to guarantee the future of the African Church.

## **CONCLUSION**

The issue of social justice is a great challenge confronting the African Church. She can no longer tackle it merely by exhortatory words, addresses and communiqués. The socio-economic, historical and political landscape of Africa demands more prophetic roles in terms of open denunciation, education and mobilization of the people to reject, to fight and to uproot unjust structures that oppresses, marginalizes, impoverishes and

dehumanizes African peoples. There will be no African Church if there are no Africans. The African Church also cannot exist independent of the context and life situations of Africans. Therefore improving the lot of Africans must be one of the constitutive dimensions of the ministry of the African Church.

In order to play the transformative role expected of her, the African Church must change from inside out. The overall perception and understanding of Christian faith by Africans must be overhauled. No longer should Christianity dichotomize spirituality and the social question, the body and the soul, the material and the spiritual, the sacred and the profane. The average African Christian must be involved in deciding his/her socio- political, economic and religious life. To do this, a big hurdle must be crossed. There must be a significant shift from the otherworldly “pie-in-the-sky spirituality” prevalent in the African Church to an integral spirituality that harmonizes faith and life and emphasizes salvation as involving the wholeness of life.

The Christian faith must be incarnated into the way of life of the people. This makes possible religious conversion, in the sense of integrating the culture of Africans with Christian faith. It brings about moral conversion by integrating the good moral values of African Traditional Religion like the sense of the sacred, hospitality, etc. into the Christian faith. In this way it can help heal the split in the personality of Africans arising from the previous double allegiance to Christian faith and traditional religious and cultural values. Such integral Christian spirituality, by enabling Christians see the connection between Christian faith and their normal lives as human beings in their social and historical conditions, can bring about political conversion, an awareness of the importance of political change that will ensure justice, love and peace. The future of the African Church depends on such integrated Christian spirituality imbued with a balanced sense of social justice.

## **NOTES**

1 Cited in Francesco Pierli et al., “Ethnicity and Human Development: The Missing Link” in Albert de Jong (ed.), *Ethnicity: Blessing or Curse*, (Nairobi-Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999, 33-55), 34.

2 Julius Nyerere, “The Church’s Role in Society”, in John Parrat (ed.) *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, (London: SPCK, 1987), 119.

3 Vatican II *Gaudium et Spes* # 18, Austin Flanery ed., *Vatican Council II*, (Bandra, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 1975),

4 Vatican II *Gaudium et Spes* # 41

5 *Justice in the World*, 6, in Joseph Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 514

6 Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 13

7 Justin Ukpon, “The Church’s Responsibility for Democracy and Human Rights”, in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 4:2 (1997), 153.

8 Patrick Ryan, “The Shifting Contexts of Sin”, in Patrick Ryan (ed.), *Structures of Sin, Seeds of Liberation*, Tangaza Occasional Papers 7, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 15

9 Vatican II *Gaudium et Spes*, # 43

10 Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Hope" in *Theological Investigations X*, trans. David Bourke, (N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1973), 258.

11 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heimemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969), 233-224.

12 J. Obi Oguejiofor, "Prologomena to an Authentic African Christian Theology", in *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, 11:1, (1997), 7.

13 Seth Adom-Oware's remark corroborates our position here: "To limit inculturation to the mere beating of drums, shouts of hymnal voices, using a gourd instead of Chalice, using a "Kento" or "Ashoke" Stoles and chasubles, translating prayers and hymns into the vernacular, etc. will not help the Church in Africa to grow as intended. We must rather Africanize the mentality of the Church in Africa and conscientize the people to accept themselves as they are, their good life-style, thought and philosophy of life and to adopt structures suited to the African way of life."

Cf. Seth Adom-Oware, "CIWA and Inculturation: A Critical Evaluation"

in Patrick Chibuko and Simeon Eboh (ed.) *Inculturation in the Third Millenium*,

(Port Harcourt: CIWA Press, 1999), 108.

14 Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "Coping with Double Allegiance among African Christians:

Insights from the Biblical Tradition”, in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 6, 2 (2004), 189.

15 As Peter Schineller notes concerning Nigeria where he has worked as the Mission Superior of the Jesuit of Nigeria and Ghana “The question remains, however, of how to judge whether a particular move or development is truly Christian and truly African, and who, which individual or which body, will make this judgement.” Peter Schineller “Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism: What is the Real Issue?” in Justin Ukpong et al., (Ed). *Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millenium: Challenges and Prospects*, (Port Harcourt: CIWA Press, 1992), 56

16 J. Obi Oguejiofor, *Ibid.*, 7

17 John Anyanwu, “Challenges and Prospects of Inculturation and Catechesis in the Third Millenium”, in Patrick Chibuko and Simeon Eboh (ed.), *Ibid.*, 108

18 Peter Schineller, “Inculturation and the Issue of Syncretism: What is the Real Issue?” *Ibid.*, 55.

19 Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, Sherbrooke, QC: Editions Paulines, 1991, # 52.

20 Vatican II Ad Gentes, 22. in Flannery, Austin (Ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Costello Publishing Company, Inc. 1975.

21 M. Maduka, “An Appeal to the Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, Seminarians, Sisters and Brothers in Nigeria”, in Elochukwu E. Uzuoku, (ed), *Religion and African Culture: Inculturation – A Nigerian Perspective*, (Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd, 1988), 203, 207.

22 Pope Paul VI affirms the universal church's regard for African Traditional Religion in these words: "The Church views with great respect the moral and religious values of the African Tradition, not only because of their meaning, but also because the Church sees them as providential as the basis for spreading the Gospel message and beginning the establishment of the new society in Christ." Cited in Emefie Ikenga Metuh, "Theological Status of African Traditional Religion" in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 1:2, (1994), 120.

23 Cited in Aylward Shorter, *Christianity and the African Imagination*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996), 110

24 Cited in A. N. O Ekwunife, "African Traditional Values and Formation in Catholic Seminaries of Nigeria" in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, 8:2, (1996), 59

25 *Ibid.*, 60

26 *Ibid.*, 62

27 Of course leaving quest for social justice to God equally applies to African Muslims and adherents of African indigenous religions. A balanced integral spirituality that neither secularizes salvation nor promotes religious indifferentism must be inculcated in all Africans by the various religions.

28 Peter Schineller, "Inculturation – Why So Slow" in *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, 4:2, (1997), 132-133.

29 Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, "A 'milestone' in teaching on human mobility", in

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