



Council 50

Towards a Church-Inspired by the Gospel-for the world
Rumbo hacia una Iglesia-inspirada en el Evangelio-para el mundo
Vers une Eglise-inspirée par l'Évangile-pour le monde
Verso una Chiesa ispirata dal Vangelo per il mondo

Issues, experiences, expectations and proposals for the renewal of our Church in Africa and its implication in the world of to-day,

I AN OVERVIEW FROM AFRICA

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Note: This broad-brush overview was the first of the two presentations on the Church in sub-Saharan Africa. It mainly reflects the situation of the Catholic Church in anglophone Africa, more particularly Southern and East Africa. The second presentation by Georges Obolo, below in § II, focuses primarily on francophone countries.

Some issues, both in church and society, concern the continent as a whole. There are however great variations among the different regions and countries in their social configurations, historical experiences and present circumstances.

Africa at a glance:

There are today 54 states in Africa, with a total population of some 1.2 billion. The seven largest states by population are Nigeria (16%), Egypt (8%), Ethiopia (8%), Democratic Republic of Congo (7%), South Africa (5%), Tanzania (4%) and Kenya (3.8%).

The continent's various peoples are mostly adherents of Christianity, Islam, and to a lesser extent traditional African religions. In Christian or Islamic communities religious beliefs are sometimes characterized by syncretism with the beliefs and practices of traditional religions.

In anglophone Africa, Roman Catholics are very much in the minority. For example, in South Africa some 80% of its 54 million people identify themselves as 'Christian' – mainly Protestant, African Independent, and Pentecostal. The 3.5 million Roman Catholics comprise only 7% of the population.

The Holy Spirit is at work in Africa:

- We see this in joyful worship, in evangelisation, in Christians working in education, health care and care for the poor and vulnerable, in witnessing against injustice, building bridges through ecumenical and inter-faith collaboration, and in countless examples of personal holiness
- Over the years, and at the present time, there are wonderful examples too of prophetic leadership in the Church, and servant leadership in solidarity with the poor and suffering.

BUT in adverse circumstances:

- A huge population explosion. UN projections suggest that in the next 35 years half of all population growth globally will be in Africa; by 2050 the continent will have about two and a half times Europe's population today
- Young people in enormous numbers are looking for work (there is massive unemployment), for decent education, for direction and hope
- Great inequalities – in education, opportunity, wealth, power (both economic and political)
- Social and economic challenges confront the Christian message: poverty, and the other side of the coin - materialism and greed; aggressive marketing and consumerism; tribalism; the continuing influence of magic and witchcraft; and the collapse of traditional moral systems under the pressures of colonial history and globalisation
- Political instability, bad governance, poor state services, incompetence and incapacity, corruption, assaults on human rights, crime and violence are too often part of the texture of daily life
- Africa is a suffering continent – sporadic wars, civil wars and acts of terror; AIDS and other health issues (TB, parasites, malaria, malnutrition, alcohol and drugs). The healthy physical and intellectual development of far too many children is deeply compromised
- Environmental degradation, an environment under threat, and a lack of political will and capacity to address the issues (water and energy crises, deforestation and desertification, pressure on arable land, fights over basic resources – for example, as basic as access to a dam in a rural area).

What of the Catholic Church?

- Growing, from barely 2 million Catholics at the start of 20th century to well over 200 million today (beware of unreliable statistics!) with great variations in contexts, characteristics and attitudes (beware of generalisations!)
- New Catholics – how deeply rooted are the values? There is great need to teach authentic Christianity in practice and in the heart rather than in the head ...

- Community, rather than individualism, is a major feature of African society, and so too in the church (but there's also fierce sectionalism & tribalism)
- Identity is important – leading to intra- and inter-religious tensions, competition, enmity, violence: a problem for ecumenism and inter-faith relations
- Vibrant, but very hierarchical – reinforced by social tradition and patriarchy
- Growing indigenisation (from being the ‘objects’ of missionary activity – in itself often admirable and heroic in many ways – to being ‘subjects’). Young religious are replacing missionaries. (*Can Africa ‘re-evangelise Europe’ as is often claimed?*)
- Inculturation (positive and negative incorporation of cultural and social practices and attitudes)
- The hierarchy: very conservative in general, doctrinally and socially (though there are notable exceptions)
- BUT bishops are correct to some extent in saying that Africa’s pressing issues are not those of the ‘North’ - Europe and North America
- The bishops’ appeal to African exceptionalism – “we’re different”– is a card often played that allows for cop-outs – e.g. ‘divorce not an issue’ (Cardinal Napier); and homosexuality is said to be not ‘African’ : to quote the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in their submission to the Synod on the Family, *The Future of the Family, our Mission*: “*With the exception of South Africa, no other country in Africa recognizes the union of persons of the same sex. Even if there are cases of persons with homosexual tendencies or practices, the question is not alarming on the continent as a whole*”.
- Bishops seem largely out of touch with their context or in denial about social realities (“What Africa do they live in?”) – e.g. SECAM’s 88 page submission to the Synod on the Family does not mention the severe criminalisation of homosexuality in 38 African countries ; nor does it mention AIDS, while condemning condom use – this, when sub-Saharan Africa has the most serious HIV and AIDS epidemic in the world: some 25 million people are living with HIV – almost 5% of adults; in South Africa some 6 million people are HIV positive; in Swaziland, 28% of the population
- Clericalism - often in toxic combination with patriarchy & authoritarianism
- Priesthood (and religious life) is too often seen as a career opportunity with status and material benefits
- Scandalous clerical behaviour is often unchecked – for example, sexually predatory (heterosexual) clergy; priests fathering children; financial corruption at parish level
- Under-resourced church: lacks both material and human capital - seminary training is generally poor – conservative, archaic, abstract, uncontextual
- Catechesis and formation is very poor (very little for adults) – often does not reflect Vatican II , let alone Pope Francis
- Poor leadership - clerical and lay (with little scope for independent-minded laity)

- Laity largely disempowered (e.g. many priests still resist Parish Pastoral Councils!) – there's not the same agitation as in Europe or North America, for various reasons (including an education gap, very poor communication and media information)
- Women are subordinate in society (though this is changing) and in the church (lay people's attitudes are often far ahead of hierarchy and clergy). Africa is way behind the world. (BUT in South Africa, Roman Catholic Women Priests are now a presence)
- Threats to the church from the state/politicians/military in various countries (e.g. Zimbabwe; and Burundi currently – church's public opposition to President Pierre Nkurunziza's third term). Also, politicians are gatekeepers for development (Paris Accord) – churches and church bodies struggle to access funding
- Challenges for *Justice and Peace* work - even committed priests and lay people often feel powerless to challenge these forces. (BUT South African Bishops – who were often courageous opponents of apartheid – who have been largely silent for 20 years since the advent of democracy, are now once again beginning to speak out against corruption, poor governance & other abuses).

The great question:

How can we help to form, support and encourage responsible, adult engagement by Catholics both in the Church and with the 'world'?

The great challenge:

How can we do this, as far as possible, in collaboration with our bishops and priests?

Three Shining Examples of Clerical/Religious/Lay Collaboration

Bishop Kevin Dowling (Rustenburg, South Africa – a rural diocese, with massive platinum mines, migrant labour, and huge disparities of wealth): *Tapologo Programme*: ARV/AIDS hospice and community-based care, including care for child-headed households, working with women community workers. Kevin Dowling defied Church teaching on condoms (to prevent HIV transmission), and faced the wrath of the papal nuncio and his fellow bishops in the name of 'life' over 'doctrine'. tapologo.com/

Denis Hurley Centre, Durban: The centre is named after a man who for 45 years was the Archbishop of Durban, the 'scourge of Apartheid', a hero of the city, and a great Vatican II leader. The establishment of the Centre is essentially a lay initiative: a multi-cultural, interfaith Muslim/Hindu/Christian project. Located in the city centre next to the Cathedral and a major mosque, it is a facility for the urban poor and marginalised (young people, street people, refugees, AIDS); an educational centre; and a cultural centre, involving collaboration between religious, city and provincial authorities for integrated urban development. www.denishurleycentre.org/

Damietta Peace Initiative (Capuchin Franciscans): The **Damietta Initiative** sows the seeds of non-violence and peace throughout Africa in the spirit of St Francis of Assisi. Building peace from the grass-roots up in deeply divided communities it is based on inter-tribal, interfaith, Muslim/Christian collaboration. There are now over 200 Damietta groups in five African countries. From Jos & Kaduna in Nigeria, to the slums of Kibera in Kenya, Muslims and Christians are learning to work together for the common good. In Zambia and South Africa cultural and ethnic differences are being tackled to build better and more sustainable communities. www.damiettapeace.org.za/

II WHICH AFRICA, 50 YEARS AFTER COUNCIL VATICAN II? ».

Georges OBOLO, President of the Network of Former Christian Youth Students in Africa¹

(translation from French by François Becker)

The Second Vatican Council can be considered as a positive revolution, because its decisions contained in the four Constitutions that were adopted, have disrupted and overturned habits in our mother church. Fifty years after this great gathering, should be evaluated, with others around the world, how all the decisions made are being implemented and taken into account today. Thus, which Africa for the renewal of our Church and its role in today's world, 50 years after Vatican II?

The answer to this question will be articulated around four main issues, namely:

- 1- Mutations and contradictions that characterize Africa;
- 2 Africa, 50 years after Vatican II;
- 3- Expectations;
- 4- Projects

1. Mutations and contradictions that characterize Africa;

In Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, the daily life of the people is punctuated by several painful changes and contradictions that we call fractures, as serious they are regarding their human, technical, spiritual, moral and socio-political aspects. These include notably:

- Wars and conflicts with their corollaries, famine, death, disease and lack of peace;
- Racism or tribalism in some countries as well as ethnic hatred and cultural intolerance;
- Fractures born from ideological tensions that can induce us to submit the truths of faith to our own intellectual categories, and therefore to the grip of powerful instruments of cultural manipulation present in our time. The consequences can then be the break of the social fabric, the cult of personality, the rule of money, materialism which breeds exploitation and poverty and also the contempt of man to magnify human society;

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- Fractures at the religious level with the rise of religious violence, religious intolerance, extremism of all kinds;
- Fractures born from moral decay and the progressive loss of values of dignity, love, ethics, solidarity and sharing that sustain a perverted and corrupt world where the vices sing the requiem of virtues...
- Economic fractures due to bad governance, poor management of natural and cultural resources;

But these changes and contradictions should not hide the image of an Africa of peoples who defend their Africanism and live in hope and expectation of a better tomorrow prompted, in a common destiny of emergence, by values of solidarity and sharing, and by a new democratic impulse, a thirst for good governance and social justice.

It is in this context of resistance to mutations that traumatize the world, make people anxious, and may make a demand on our faith, that the new evangelization must be rooted, underpinned by the power of the gospel to bring liberation to the oppressed and justice in the world, adapting our practices to the Catholic church in Africa to continue to exist in this world.

2. Africa, 50 years after Vatican II;

Then we can note that this complex and plural Africa, through his Catholic Church, experienced variously the flame of Vatican II, and shows similarities and differences from which needs are expressed differently from a local church, to one another.

2.1- Common points:

- The charismatic renewal that invigorates the faith of believers;
- Enculturation which allowed a better understanding of the liturgy through the consideration of cultural values ;
- flowering of basic ecclesial communities;
- Strong growth of Catholics and young people;

But,

- The increasing trend of sexual practices and abuses, moral depravity, including child abuse by members of the clergy;
- The non extension of the conclusions of Vatican II;
- The low impact of the family in the operation of our Church;
- Influences of traditional religions, Islam and Pentecostal churches said as the revival;

2.2- The differences:

- Relations between the Church and State are variously experienced (Separation, independence, compromise, complicity ...)
- Accompaniment of youth movements by the appointment of chaplains (in some churches it is a routine while in another it is a free fall);

- The place and role of the laity is variously interpreted in different churches (effective involvement in some churches and non-consideration in others);
- Cultural practices;
- Peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims variously lived;

3. Expectations of our Church in Africa in this century,

These expectations are numerous and varied. We have all noticed that the world is changing, and we, Africans, cannot continue to ignore these movements whatever the pretexts are. Moreover, Pope Francis surprises us with his positions that might shock us, but we have to face the truth, to do violence to ourselves, to adapt our practices to stay in the world.

These expectations can be grouped into three points:

3.1 Society and family:

- **Homosexuality:** It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore this problem today. The Church in Africa, as in the rest of the world, must go beyond our traditions to conduct discussions on this subject.
- **Polygamy:** It is part of our society and nearly 150 years of evangelization did not change anything. Polygamous families live well their faith. It is time for the universal Church to welcome this practice, to organize it for framing it in a better way.
- **The married-divorced-remarried:** Why to continue to deprive divorced from the practice of the faith? Divorce should no longer be a reason to be excluded of the practices of faith.
- **The rites and traditions:** The practice of our faith should incorporate some ancestral beliefs and our customs and habits (e.g. the cult of skulls in the West Cameroon, widowhood rites in the Central Cameroon as the rite of purification "TSO "at Betis who have lost their meaning because they are now done by priests, which for us, is incomprehensible).
- **The policy, poverty and conflict prevention:** the social doctrine of the Church provides clear and detailed guidance on these concepts; but their ownership by priests and laity is lived differently and sometimes in a partisan manner by priests and in fear by the laity.

3.2 Operation of the Church

- **The review of the status of the Priests and Permanent Deacons.**
 - **Compensation:** priests must have a "clear." status of employee. Priest's poverty could be one of the reasons why we notice their drift (activism, charlatanism, exorcism, trade sacraments, etc. ...)
 - **Marriage:** priestly celibacy should be an option and not an obligation. End the hypocrisy of clerical celibacy. Priests must officially assume their parental duty. Similarly, it is necessary to extend the missions of Permanent Deacons.

- **The place of women and the laity in the Church** has to be redefined. More openness and more accountability are well indicated for everyone brings his little stone to the construction of the Church. "Open widely the doors to Christ," said Saint John Paul.
- **The decisions of the synods:** it is important that the decisions made at different synods are promptly made known and disseminated;

3.3 Liturgy

- Why not an **exchange / sharing about the gospel during the homily** to make the celebrations interactive in order to allow a greater participation?
- **The ritual language** (used today in our churches) remains incomprehensible to many. (this language might be overtaken) ;
- **The introduction of the vernacular in the catechism** and in all biblical teaching is suitable so that everyone can pray God in his/her culture;
- **The visit of the remains of Saints** everywhere is already part of the subject of tradition and rite of the Church and raises many questions, particularly in Madagascar, where some Christian Catholic youth are demotivated because of disagreements and of some decisions made, what constitutes serious threats ;
- **The development of centers** for the understanding of the holy scripture has become a necessity ;

4. Projects

Finally, some questions, or lines of thinking, deserve to be looked at. They are organized in three projects:

Project 1: Functioning of the Church.

- Is it not necessary to renovate and simplify the rites for a greater participation of the faithful in the liturgy? For example, the homily may be an opportunity for exchange.
- Could the role and place of bishops, priests, religious, families and committed lay people, be well defined and well clarified for a smooth functioning of the Church and a better opening to society?
- Priest's celibacy is not a dogma and priesthood should be seen as a service: could the celibacy of priests be considered as an option rather than an obligation? And could priests, be paid?

Project 2: The Church and society.

The society as a whole, especially Africa of the peoples, lives at the rhythm of wars, conflicts either political or not, poverty and misery which among other consequence generate large migrations. This situation, in the light of the social doctrine of the Church, challenges our Mother Church, and raises the issue of an evangelization adapted to the context, in order to free the oppressed and bring justice to the world.

Project 3: The Church and the current events

Issues such as homosexuality, polygamy, divorced-remarried, and remarried Catholics priests raises the question of the renewal of the Church and of Communities of believers towards an active community model for our Church. The construction of this model raises, first, issues linked to our faith and to our cultural values underpinned by the intuitions of Vatican II.

CONCLUSION

From Council Vatican II, we can recall that the Church is people of God, family, community of communion. From this, some major challenges can be identified such as the knowledge of the documents of the Magisterium of the Church, the mutual opening of particular Churches, the promoting of some integration for an ecclesial, pastoral and else enrichment. As a result, promoting a sense of history and a taste for reflection, as well as a permanent reflection would be greatly helpful to the renewal of our Church nowadays. The temptation to consider the Gospel as an idea rather than somebody is a daily threat.