THE AFRICAN SYNOD: Initial Results and Reflections

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The African Synod - Initial Results and Reflections

Editorial

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa was announced by Pope John Paul II during the solemnity of the Epiphany, February 6, 1989. The event was celebrated, like other Synods, within the period of one month - April 10 to May 8 1994. But, unlike other synods, it took as long as five years to prepare: longer than the period needed to get ready the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council!

One should not wonder at the time it took to put the Synod together. The need for the whole People of God in Africa to hold a meeting to discuss, share experiences, formulate action programmes in order to take full responsibility for evangelization in the continent was felt by bishops, theologians, clergy and laity as far back as the Vatican II Council. This need started assuming more realistic and structural forms with the establishment of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in 1969. The memorable words of Paul VI addressed to SECAM in Kampala, 1969, "you Africans are missionaries to yourselves" were frequently echoed in the halls of the 1994 synod. Many Episcopal Conferences (especially in Francophone Africa) and theologians wanted a council. Many others were in favour of some other type of meeting. Some were undecided. But most were convinced of the need for a meeting. This may explain the length of time it took to prepare the Catholic Church in Africa for this very important meeting.

In this issue of our Bulletin, we listen to the story of those who took active part in the five year preparation of the Synod and/or participated in the synod sessions (Onaiyekan, Tshibangu, Okoye). The contributions of these three, who were so to speak insiders, to this issue of our
Bulletin are more or less similar. This is clear from their enunciation of the focus or key points discussed by the synod – evangelization, inculturation, human promotion, and social communication. But the preliminary assessment of the synod by each one communicates their individual feelings and reflections on this important meeting. Each sees from the concerns of his own local Church what should be the preoccupation of the church in Africa.

Two other presentations by theologians who followed the synod from a distance, Nnamani and Odozor, ponder on themes which emerged as fundamental to the self image or crucial concern of the church in Africa in the year 2000 (Church-as-Family and theology of marriage). The image of Church-as-Family, though not new, has never been fully explored as a model of the church. The synod projects this image as Good News! Similarly, the issue of marriage in Africa which SECAM and national and regional conferences in Africa have agonized over for decades preoccupied the 1994 Synod in a serious way. The gradual and graded approach to marrying in Africa, the public and communal celebration of marriage, the distinctively religions tone which marriage carries are ways in which the African reality enriches the gospel or sacraments, and the gospel in turn transforms the culture through its eschatological intent. These riches are brought by Africa into the communion of Churches for the up-building of the universal Church. In presenting these two theological opinions, our Bulletin is making its contribution in proposing patterns of deeper reflection on issues of inculturation in the communion of churches, as desired by the African Synod.

Obiora Ike and Elochukwu Uzukwu.
What We Saw And Heard At The African Synod

John Onaiyekan

0. Introduction

What we saw and heard during the past month was indeed an event of grace from the Lord for all of us who were privileged to have participated directly in the Synod. For an experience so rich in content and inspiration, I can only give a few general impressions, highlighting some of the issues that struck me most vividly.

My story of the Synod will be in four brief parts: (a) The Synod looks at Church and Society in Africa (b) Critical self-assessment of the Church (c) the specific tasks of evangelization (d) The fruits of the Synod. I shall conclude with a couple of personal remarks.

1. Africa Looks to its Future: The Church in Society in the Light of the Synod for Africa.

A Cry of Anguish

In December last year, the Nigerian Bishops went to Rome on their "Ad Limina" visit. From Rome they took the unprecedented step of issuing a Christmas Message to the nation with the significant title "Let not our dreams die". We started off as an independent nation in 1960 with great hopes and expectations. The tragic thirty month civil war heightened rather than diminished these hopes. In the mid seventies, we were planning big: big airports, bit seaports, big industrial installations especially in the iron and steel and the petroleum sector, big universities, - even a brand new big Federal capital to be constructed out of empty virgin land. We were the Giant of Africa, ready to take off to join the orbit of the great world powers. My generation
grew up on that exhilarating mood of optimism. And indeed many of these giant projects actually took off and went a long way.

Then somewhere along the line, around the eighties, things began to turn sour. One after the other, many hopes of previous decades were postponed and eventually abandoned; thanks to a tragic collusion between mismanagement and corruption at home, and a hostile and merciless economic atmosphere abroad. Thus hopes became mere dreams. But even dreams became an act of faith possible only for the most optimistic. One had the feeling of being in a jet plane at top speed eating up a run-way but unable to take off and unable to halt. The Christmas message of the Bishops was a cry of anguish to our rulers to keep our dreams of greatness alive; and a call of encouragement to all our people not to give up.

The experience of Nigeria is the experience of the rest of Africa - except that it is still worse in many places. The special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, ("African Synod" for short) gave us an opportunity to compare notes, listen to one another’s stories, and reflect together. This only confirmed the sad fact that "to look to the future of Africa" is anything but cheerful. But we did, and we refused to despair. We were even able to disperse on a note of joy and hope, having reinforced our solidarity, renewed our commitment to integral evangelization, and rededicated ourselves to the Risen Lord of history. How did this happen? Let me take you back again to the proceedings of the Synod.

1.1. The Present situation of Church and Society in Africa

1.1.1. A mosaic of Experiences

As in all Synods, the first days were devoted to listening to brief (8 minutes) speeches from the Synod Fathers. We heard over 200 speeches from all parts of Africa. It was a most enriching experience, and we listened to the variety of situations of the Church and Society on our continent. It was most edifying to note a genuine
interest of the Assembly in what each had to say. While Egypt was present at Pentecost 2000 years ago, one bishop from Chad invited the Synod Fathers to the first centenary of the beginning of evangelization in his diocese—scheduled for the year 2030! Places like Mauritania, Djibouti and Libya are only a Church of presence with no hope and hardly any intentions of winning converts, while some dioceses in black Africa are baptizing thousands of adult catechumens every year. Islam is a major factor in many places, with different types of relationships with the Church, ranging from "very good" in Senegal, equilibrium of forces in Nigeria, a tolerated ministry in the Maghreb, a precarious survival in Egypt to outright policy of extermination of Christians in the Sudan. We shall come back to this point later.

1.1.2. A success story

But on the whole, the dominant note was one of gratitude to God for what has become generally acknowledged as an extraordinary success story of rapid growth and vitality of the Catholic Church in Africa. A Nigerian Church historian Fr. C. Obi traced the history of evangelization in Africa and showed how the spirit has acted according "to the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Cardinal Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, painted an exhilarating picture of the present rapid pace of growth of the Catholic Church in Africa – with all the facts, figures and statistics for which his offices in Piazza di Spagna are famous and deservedly respected. Particularly spectacular is the rapid change in holders of leadership roles from foreign missionaries to indigenous and often young persons. The composition of the Synod Assembly, and the high quality of its members was an eloquent demonstration of the progresses made in a few decades.

1.1.3. The Society at large

The Synod opened with the horrible news of the
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fratricidal massacres in Rwanda, one of the most evangelized countries of Africa. In many cases, Catholics were killing Catholics. Among the list of corrupt and dictatorial rulers are some who claim to be Catholics. In many countries, bishops were called upon to mediate in the deep political crisis facing their nations groping their way to democracy. This was greeted as a sign of the confidence which the people have in the catholic clergy and especially in its hierarchy. But that also raises the question of the sense of political responsibility of the Catholic lay citizens. In a few countries, there is progress in the direction of greater political stability. But most countries are still badly ruled; some very badly ruled.

The political crisis compounds an already difficult economic situation. In Nigeria the middle class has practically been wiped out as general standard of living plummets. Social services – schools, health care services and welfare programmes – are disintegrating under the structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), and the international financial institutions, the IMF and the World Bank, congratulate our leaders for a job well done. The person in the street hears we are heavily indebted. But he/she wonders what we bought and cannot understand why he/she must pay for the mistakes – or greed – of others. The youth have hardly any future to look forward to. There is little incentive to study hard: many with first class certificates are roaming the streets unemployed, or have had to escape abroad on self-exile. We heard in the Synod that this is the situation in most of the continent. The news of successful elections in South Africa was a breath of fresh air, for which we rejoice and thank the Lord. But the general picture is still one of general disintegration and misery.

1.1.4. Church and Society

The Synod faced squarely the challenge of being Church in the concrete situation of Africa of today. How can the Gospel Message be "good news" in a continent so full of "bad news"? What must the Church be in order that "he
message may be relevant and credible”. Statistics can tell only a part of the story. It is important to count and rejoice in the number of converts. But it is even more important to assess what impact the Christian message is making on the daily lives of our people and to what extent Gospel values of peace, justice, and love are being promoted.

2. Critical Self-assessment

In this assessment, the two key concepts of evangelization as our mission and Church as the agent of that mission gained our close attention.

2.1. Integral Evangelization

The main theme of the Synod was evangelization. It was also the unifying factor which tied together the various items on the Synod agenda. The Synod stressed the importance and priority of the Proclamation of the good news of Christ in an explicit fashion to all who have not accepted it in faith. But it was also strengthened in the conviction that evangelization in Africa today necessarily entails close attention to inculturation, openness to dialogue especially with other believers in Christ and in God, and a deep involvement in the promotion of justice and peace. Furthermore, social communication, whether with modern or traditional means, is not only a necessary instrument of evangelization, but also a world to be evangelized. In this discussion, frequent references were made to the great missionary documents of the Magisterium, Ad Gentes of Vatican II, Evangelium Nuntiandi of Paul VI, and Redemptoris Missio of John Paul II. There was a calm and unanimous conviction on the complexity and interrelatedness of the different tasks of evangelization referred to above. At least for the African Church the days of polemics and debates over the scope of evangelization seem over.
2.2. The Church as Agent of Evangelization

A lot of attention was paid to examining the Church as it now exists in Africa, with its strengths and weaknesses. Generally young and vibrant, it is full of the enthusiasm and optimism which the experience of growth bestows. On the other hand, it needs to deepen its spiritual conviction, pursue the full knowledge of the truth of the Gospel and mobilize itself ever more effectively for mission in co-responsibility and collaboration. The irreplaceable value of witness of life was stressed for all in the Church, clergy, religious and laity. The witness of the laity in the marketplaces of life was acknowledged as crucial if Africa is to enjoy the redeeming message of the Gospel.

Already in the pre-Synodal documents, the concept of the Church as Family of God had emerged as a most appropriate ecclesiological image in Africa with its rich traditions on the family. This came out even stronger in the Synod proceedings as an image which emphasizes care for the other, solidarity, warmth of relations, acceptance, dialogue and trust. It also shows how authority is exercised as service in love. The hope was expressed that an African ecclesiology would soon emerge based on this concept of Church as family, a concept that is not without biblical foundation. The experience of Small Christian Communities in AMECEA countries of Eastern Africa and now spreading to many other parts of Africa was consistently proposed as a concrete model of how the ecclesiology of Church-Family can be brought to the daily and direct experience of the people at the local level.

2.3. A Missionary Church

Despite the phenomenal growth of the Church in Africa, there is still a lot to do to bring the christian message to every one on the continent, hence the need for the Church in Africa to be missionary in its thrust. We were reminded of the prophetic words of Pope Paul VI in 1969 that Africans must be missionaries to Africa. The work and achievements of the foreign missionaries were acknowledged
in deservedly flowing terms and their continued role stressed. But the participation of Africans in the missionary programme of the Church at home and abroad, whether in inter-continental or in African missionary institutes was a cause of joy and sign of a Church come of age. Missionary awareness is to be further promoted at all levels in the Church. There were passionate pleas for African missionaries to go to the aid of more needy areas, like the Muslim dominated areas of North Africa, among the Afro-Americans of Latin America and the Caribbeans, as well as among the growing communities of African immigrants and refugees in Europe. How a poor Church is to handle meeting the financial costs of missio ad gentes was left for further reflection. It would need to be seen as an aspect of the broader question of the financial self-reliance of our churches. In any case, we have to encourage our people to support the missions even from their own poverty, especially as some are poorer than others.

3. The specific tasks of Evangelization

After proclamation, and within the context of evangelization, the Synod reflected at length on each of the four other tasks of evangelization mentioned in the pre-synodal documents. We noted as the synod progressed that emphasis fell more and more on proclamation compared with the other four. I believe this too is a correct reflection of the right scale of priorities. For example, of the 62 propositions formulated as summaries of the Synod work, 26 were on proclamation. The rest were as follows: Inculturation - 10, Dialogue - 6, Justice and Peace - 12, Social Communication - 7. Many important issues were raised.

3.1 Inculturation

This was tackled in a most responsible and serious fashion. Its theological basis was clarified in terms of such fundamental theological concepts as Trinity, Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. The aim, it was stressed, is to bridge the gap between faith and life, not to offer a cheap and
What we Saw and Heard At the African Synod

easy form of Christianity. The usual areas of liturgy, theological formulation, and marriage were discussed. But if anyone was expecting any extravagant ideas or a "major break-through" in these matters, the Synod would be a disappointment. Rather, there was unity of mind in continuity with existing tradition on the level of principles, while pastoral attention, serious studies, and courageous exploitation of existing areas of freedom in experimentation were strongly recommended. Here too, the difference is clear from place to place, not only as regards practical challenges but also as to how much progress has been made.

3.2. Dialogue

The discussion on dialogue followed the line of the pre-synodal documents, with a significant emphasis on the need to nurture a spirit of dialogue and to practice it within the Church all across the board. More time was however devoted to dialogue with African Traditional Religions (ATR) and with Islam.

As regards ATR, it can be said that the Synod finally rehabilitated the religion of our fore-fathers, giving full recognition to the genuine religious values it contains. It is this which makes the African so open to the Gospel message. The authoritative exponents and devout followers of these religions deserve respect.

A lot was said about Islam. There are serious problems in relationship in many places where intolerance, oppression and at times even violence and killing are perpetrated by people who claim to be defending or promoting Islam. Such problems become challenges to be faced in faith, humility and love. We reflected together on how to respond in an evangelical way to provocation and violence. There is need for prayer, and the dialogue of love and life. But there is also need for effective action at all levels: religious, political, diplomatic. The bottom line: the Synod rejects meeting violence with violence. In limit cases, the principles of legitimate self-defence and the disarming of the unjust aggressor were evoked. We should continue to stress that
freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and we should challenge all governments, including Islamic nations, to respect this right.

3.3. On Justice and Peace

The emphasis was on the responsibility of Africa and its rulers to evolve a more stable political climate, stop mismanagement and embezzlement of scarce public resources, and avoid fratricidal conflicts and wars. But also, the foreign dimensions were highlighted: the burdens of the colonial past, the unjust structures of world trade, commerce and finances, the debt burden, arms trafficking and the collusion of foreign and local rogues to loot the treasuries of our nations.

The local churches are to continue their prophetic roles, intensify programmes for justice and peace and show by example what a just society should be. The Synod also challenged the local churches in rich lands to make themselves advocates of greater justice in international relations with their governments and with international organizations.

3.4. Social Communication

This topic received the least attention in terms of volume of ideas. But the much that was said was very important. The pre-Synodal documents contain most of what was discussed: the need to pay attention to both modern and traditional media, the power of the modern means of communication, the media world as both subject and object of evangelization. Important practical issues raised include: project of continental radio station for Africa, satellite channel for global evangelization, freedom for media people, and the need to insist that all media, state and private, serve the people.

4. Fruits of the Synod

The Pope has repeatedly announced that he will visit
Africa to celebrate the fruits of the Synod. This Synod has taken a long time to prepare. But there is a consensus that it was well worth all the long preparation. The fruits which began already before the Synod itself, matured during the one month working session. What are these fruits?

4.1 Post-Synodal Exhortation

Like in every Synod, we are expecting a Post-Synodal exhortation of the Pope on the work of the Synod. This will be based on all the documentations of the Synod process: Lineamenta, Instrumentum Laboris and all the papers and reports produced at the Synod. This will be a final record of the Synod to serve as point of reference for posterity.

4.2. The Propositions

The propositions will form a major source for this final document. According to the well tried Synod process, the Propositions are a way of summarizing the broad consensus of the Synod Fathers on the theme of the Synod. The long and sometimes tedious process of formulating, discussing, reformulating, negotiating, compromising which goes into the production of the final list of propositions, is an admirable exercise in collegiality. In this process, the Synod Fathers share ideas, debate them in a spirit of search for the truth in order to arrive at a common mind.

Since they are elaborated mainly in the "circuli minores" or discussion groups - where observers and "experts" can make contributions - these propositions are also an effective way for admitting valid input from those who may have a right to address the Synod as "Synod Fathers".

By the ingenious process of moving from small groups to general assembly and back again to small groups, it was possible for the over 250 Synod Fathers to discuss in depth in groups while sharing the ideas of everyone else through the unified lists of propositions and amendments. The key figures in all this process of gestation are the group reporters, while the Relator Generalis and his team ensured a global view that is also faithful to the spirit and
richness of the Synod.

4.3 The Message

Already the Synod itself did publish a Message, a document that tried to capture the general mood of the Synod and to give the People of God and the general public an immediate communication on the Synod. Drafted by a commission appointed for the purpose, the message received a general approval of the Synod Assembly, but did not go through the rigorous process, amendments and votings of the propositions. It is nevertheless a useful record, especially while we wait for the Pope's final document.

4.4. Collegial solidarity

A Synod, and especially an African Synod cannot have its abundant fruits adequately wrapped up in a document. The Synod is an experience of grace: to celebrate, to share, to live by. For a month, we made the experience of living in a Church that is a Family of God, united in love across boundaries of nations, race and social conditions. Our collegial reflection has enriched each one. The most important fruit is what we all take back in terms of convictions, ideas, and inspirations for the future. It is now important to share this fruit first with the other members of the African hierarchy who remained at home, and then with the members of Christ's faithful in our respective dioceses. In this sense, the fruit of the Synod has begun and will last well beyond the year 2000.

5. Conclusion

I wish to conclude with two brief remarks. First, in this Synod, an admirable degree of common mind was experienced, despite the wide variety of the African continent. In particular, on matters of principle, whether in faith or moral, there was no case of any sharp divisions. Even on the level of pastoral perceptions and concrete
suggestions for action, differences of positions were accommodated as representing different responses to different challenges. The principal aim - to promote evangelization in the different circumstances of the Church in Africa - united us all in a common chorus, singing in harmony with different voices and instruments.

Secondly, I have been personally edified at the palpable sense of solidarity and "feeling-with" in respect of churches in conditions of dramatic difficulties: war in Rwanda, religious persecution in Sudan, the Church of mere presence in Islamic nations. We all felt challenged to share one another's burdens and pains. May be that is also why the Synod was such a joyful celebration of the Risen Lord reigning in the church and in the world.
The Special Synod for Africa and the Tasks of African Theology

Tharcisse Tshibangu

I. The Synod: Its Finality and Objectives

1) We must give thanks and glory to God, who has made a gift of the "African Synod" to the Universal Church and particularly to the Church of Africa. It has just held its meetings in Rome under the presidency of the Pope himself, John Paul II. The Pope deserves homage for the inspiration and for his convinced faith in the future of the Church of Africa, that decided him to convocate this special Synod for Africa which we have just lived through in great hope and with warm enthusiasm from 10 April to 8 May.

2) As we had occasion to recall, this Synod was the object of great hope and was much awaited. Its conclusions and orientations will be communicated by the Pope at an opportune moment.

3) African lay people, priests, religious, theologians, bishops, all helped ardently to mould this event and contributed to it, each in his or her manner and at his or her level, in the preparation and both before and after the actual convening by the Holy Father.

4) At first there was question of an "African Council" or, in default of that, an "African Synod" for a start. Having taken account of all relevant elements the Pope decided to convocate the African Synod according to the form and modalities he determined. We were called then to a great dialogue, which Pope John Paul II himself recognized as necessary at this historic moment on the eve of the third millennium of the Christian Church and era.

5) Our task was to analyze and take stock of the general situation prevailing in Africa at this moment and examine seriously the religious problems arising on the continent as a whole; we would also notice the indispensable conditions
for the effective commitment of all believers and especially of Catholic Christians. This would be with a view to the integral and harmonious development and the full maturing on a spiritual base of the African person and of all the peoples of Africa in justice and peace on these levels: cultural, social, economic and political.

The Synod undertook to accomplish this programme with reference to the theme that was defined for it: "The Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000: 'You will be my witnesses' (Acts 1:8)".

II. The Main Theological Tasks After the Synod

A. African Theology and Its Intent

1) The theology which is being articulated and developed in Africa is commonly called today 'African Theology'. The chief sources of African theology on a scientific level are established from a given basic epistemological approach which is becoming clearer every day:

i) Like every Christian theology it refers to the Word of God in the biblical revelation and the whole heritage of Christian tradition;
ii) A deep and profound study of all that is positive for Christianity in the essence and spirit of traditional African religions;
iii) Total African anthropology;
iv) The contextualization and so the consideration of all contemporary realities which pose problems about value-options and ethical questions.

African theology is taking shape. More and more it is differentiating itself by its intent, context of articulation and given orientations from the currents and tendencies of Western theology, which has become more and more analytic and historic than genuinely hermeneutic. In the heart of the Third World theologies (cf the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) it wants to be a 'Theology of the
Integral Salvation of the Human Person, which on the one side develops into a 'Theology of Inculturation' and on the other into a 'Theology of Human and Socio-Economic Promotion'.

2) So far the theological enterprise in Africa has addressed the following questions. Numerous publications appear on them, more or less researched and more or less scientifically critical. We note:

: Christological essays and studies;
: Ecclesiological researches on the characteristics that ought to mark the status and functioning of the African Church (For example, the Church as 'family' or the Church as 'Spirit' more than institutional structure and so on);
: Moral theology and the examination of specific ethical questions regarding the African cultural tradition;
: The African liturgical movement and the development of systems of rites and sacraments;
: The installing of new pastoral ministries relevant to the needs of the Church and of the Christian communities;
: Problems of 'political liberation' and conditions of integral human promotion...

Moreover, desires of a canonical order have already been expressed, with a view to structuring Church organization in the most appropriate and relevant manner in Africa. We may note on this point that the African Church is invited already to determine in collegiality the 'particular juridical norms' that seem opportune to it within the framework of what the present Code of Canon Law of 1983 permits.

B. Essential Elements Retained by the Synod and Doctrinal Orientations

1) There was much talk at the Synod of 'the fundamental principle of inculturation' as an exigence and norm of evangelization. This appeared to be the Synod's central
concerning. On this point, the summit of the incarnation of Christianity and of the inculturation of the Christian faith will take place at the level of doctrinal assimilation and then of its expression when those in the young Churches are capable of working to the point of a 'rethinking' of theological understanding, that itself is preceded by a new questioning, when it seems necessary, of the data of Christian revelation in view of a deeper understanding of it.

2) This is even the recommendation of Vatican II in Ad Gentes, no. 22:

If this goal is to be achieved, theological investigation must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area, as it is called. In this way, under the light of the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been consigned to sacred Scripture, and which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and the teaching authority of the Church.

Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation.

C. Specific Themes of Investigation and Research

With regard to the particularly important and specifically urgent themes to be examined in depth after the Synod, the following have a place. They are grouped and presented according to the titles of the chapters as they were discussed in the Synod assembly.

In relation to the Proclamation and Witness' of the Gospel:

1. A deeper understanding of the foundations and conditions so that 'evangelization' may be effectively and always 'centred on meeting with the living Person of
Christ'.

2. To expose at length and teach by word and by witness of life that 'holiness as a living expression of configuration to Christ be presented always as the finality of evangelization'.

3. To deepen in Africa the reality of the Church, which is the institutional agent and framework of the whole of evangelization by considering it as 'Church-as-Family of God'. This will show still better how the different members are in relation to one another in trust and dialogue and how authority is service in love'. So the Synod explicitly encourages theologians to develop the theology of Church-as-family in its richness while remaining aware of its limits.

4. With the 'Living Ecclesial Communities' or "Basic Ecclesial Communities' there be founded a pastoral of evangelization as a theological "locus', source and reference at its own level and in its contextual framework.

5. Continued study of the status and roles of the laity in the present situation but with perspectives on the future to discern the nature of its specific being in the Church and to determine all the functions that fall to lay people in society.

In relation to 'Inculturation':

1. Two propositions like the following should be clarified and studied better as theological basis for inculturation:

   Jesus Christ, Son of God made Man, crucified and risen in glory, is the centre and model of all aspects of the Christian life...
   Every culture needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the Mystery of Easter...

2. To clarify, and to ground if necessary, the criteria of inculturation. The Synod offers two essential ones: (a) compatibility with the Christian message; (b) communion with the Universal Church.

In a practical way and as concrete action, a reference could be opportune to the Instruction given in 1659 by the Sacred Congregation De Propaganda Fide to missionaries in
the Far East. It must be noted that the final reference in case of doubt or hesitation is the Magisterium of the Church.

3. According to the Synod, theology will pursue the examination and deeper study of the areas thus described:

'inculturation' aims at permitting humans to welcome Jesus Christ in the wholeness of his personal being, which is realized and accomplished in different dimensions: cultural, social, economic and political.

it declares likewise that inculturation comprises all aspects of ecclesial life: theology (faith and morality), liturgy (sacraments and sacramentals), the Church's life and structure (ecclesiology, the status of consecrated life, the Church's norms and laws).

certain questions are emphasized by the Synod as being of particularly urgent interest –

- the domain of liturgy
- specific problems of marriage in Africa, to be studied 'from the theological, sacramental, liturgical and canonical points of view'
- the question of the legitimacy of the veneration of ancestors, under certain Christian conditions to be determined
- African beliefs in 'the world of spirits', good or bad, in relation to the phenomenon of 'witchcraft'.

In relation to 'Dialogue':

In a general way this point is about the theological conditions for assuming an ecumenical spirit and a spirit of positive and efficacious dialogue in the bosom of the African Church and in relation to African society. This would be between the different members of the Church, with other Christian denominations, with Islam and Moslems and in connection with the positive values in African traditional religions from the Christian point of view.

In relation to 'Justice and Peace':

1. A researched contextual theology must be elaborated in Africa on the prophetic role of the Church and the
duties of all its members on this point, from bishops to lay people, passing through priests and those in consecrated life. In this connection a serious and genuine 'theology of the integral salvation of the human person in his/her concrete circumstances' should be studied in depth and well articulated for the attention of all.

2. The Synod brought special attention to bear on the ecclesial and social status of women and their indispensable role in the Church and society. Theologians must work on the orientations given by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation on woman and her mission; they will take account of all the factors, religious, cultural and social, which affect the African woman in her life and action.

3. Family ethic and bio-ethnic: There arose from all the exchanges in the Synod on family problems an insistent demand to safeguard those traditional family values that are deemed valid from the Christian point of view, the promotion of values that will 'save the family', first cell and 'precious patrimony of humanity'. Along this line theologians, in collaboration and solidarity with thinkers and specialists in all aspects of the family, will arrange to set up structures and study-commissions that deal especially with problems of a moral and ethical aspect concerning conjugal life, the theories and principles that concern population (demographic politics) and development. There is also an urgent need for Africa to create commissions on bio-ethics on the level of the continent and as national units, as exist in the West and other countries.

4. The ethic of international relations: The Synod denounced the injustices existing in the system of international relations; especially between the poor African countries that are in need and the well-to-do countries, the industrial nations. Theologians and other thinkers in Africa are invited to propose the principles of a deontological and ethical code that will determine international relations in equity for the future; they will base themselves for this on the expert scientific analyses of specialists in the diverse socio-economic disciplines. This orientation towards future research has been felt necessary considering notably the economic and financial relationships that have led to the
situation of the enormous debts Africa owes to the countries and financial institutions of the north.

In relation to the means of 'social Communications':

The importance and role of the mass media is evident and goes without saying in our contemporary world. Here theologians will have to ground ever more the principle of access by everyone to the means of social communication and the principle of freedom of expression within the legitimate limits of the law. Likewise it is urgent for African theology and Christian thought in general to show and recall the principles of morality to be respected by all in the use of the mass media.

III. The Linking of African Theological Work to That of the Universal Church

1. The African Synod, in outlining ways forward and determining the fields of research considered urgent and having priority with regard to pastoral work as a whole in the post-synodal period, invites us to consider the positive, constructive contributions African theological work is making to the benefit of the whole Church of Jesus Christ. These contributions concern especially the doctrine of the sacraments, ecumenism, the problems of secularization, the efforts of the Universal Church in view of the 'Christian inculturation' of contemporary technico-scientific culture.

2. Furthermore, African theologians like all others in other continents must promote a 'prospective' thought in order to sense, forestall and foresee the doctrinal and pastoral problems of the future. They must undertake studies in a general prospective and more particularly in a spiritual and religious prospective. The future of humanity in general and particularly the future of religion and Christianity must be prepared in a more committed way by using the scientific and technical instruments presently available. Ours is a great apostolic and missionary job, 'to evangelize the future', one might say, by contributing to 'project' and 'make' the future of Christianity. It is striving to make 'the ideal and preferable future' of the
Church as reality, making a choice among 'future possibles', which themselves are situated beyond 'future probables' in the foreseeable prolonged direction of the present state of things and the tendencies of facts, ideas and doctrine.

IV. Fallout from the Synod and Sequel to It

1. The dynamic of an ecclesial and spiritual 'Event' as important as the African Synod that we have just lived through demands a sequel to its reflections and propositions. This holds first of all for all the propositions that are purely of doctrinal orientation. On the other hand, although this point was not directly addressed or examined in depth by the Synod, it would be normal to foresee in the more or less long term new establishments of an institutional and also structural order; these would simply be logical, operational consequences of the perspectives opened by the Synod.

2. It is probable, and already foreseen, that meetings will take place in a limited or larger way in the months and years to come in order to concretize the gains of the Synod and envisage ways of putting its recommendations to work. In this perspective we congratulate the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Urban University for having taken the first initiative of calling a large meeting in Rome for information, evaluation and reflection for the future, some days after the African Synod closed. It is an example that will be followed.

V. Conclusion

I can finish this short contribution I was asked to make in no better way than by quoting with satisfaction and in a spirit of faithful service to the Church the confident address to African theologians contained in the Final Message of the Synod:

Your mission is a great and noble one in the service of inculturation which is the important site for the development of African theology. You have already
begun to propose an African reading of the mystery of Christ. The concepts of Church-as-Family, Church-as-Brotherhood, are the fruits of your work in contact with the Christian experience of the People of God in Africa. The Synod knows that without the conscientious and devoted exercise of your function something essential would be lacking. The Synod expresses its gratitude and its encouragement to you to continue working with your distinctive role certainly, but in communion with your Pastors so that the doctrinal riches which will flow from this Assembly may be deepened for the benefit of our particular Churches and the universal Church (No. 56).

It is for African theologians to get down to work now with more ardour, full of confidence in themselves and full of faith and hope for the future.

ENDNOTES


2. Translation of W.M. Abbott, The Documents of Vatican II.

3. Translation of L'Osservatore Romano.

(Delivered at the Pontifical Urban University, Rome, 12 May 1994).

Translated by Myles L. Fay cssp.
The Synod Challenges the Church in Africa

Chukwuma J. Okoye

1. The Synod in Process

The first surprise for many was the Opening Liturgy on Sunday, 10 April 1994, in St. Peter's Basilica, presided over by the Holy Father and concelebrated by 1 Patriarch, 35 Cardinals, 39 Archbishops, 146 Bishops and 90 Priests. It was in the Roman Rite with elements taken from the ancient rites of Africa (Responsorial Psalm in Amharic from the Ethiopian Rite and the Gospel in Arabic according to the Coptic Rite) with adaptations from the Roman Rite for the Dioceses of Zaire.

The synod had 242 members, 46 observers, 20 experts and 7 Fraternal Delegates. To this number is to be added the staff of 30 assistants, the special press corps working with the Sala Stampa, the Vatican Radio and the Vatican Information services, the simultaneous translators... The 4 episcopal participants from Rwanda could not attend because of the disturbances in their country; two African Cardinals died just before the Assembly and two others could not attend for health reasons. It is significant that almost 40% of the 497 bishops in Africa were present at the synod, that is 2 bishops for every five, a representation more than triple that of most chapters of religious congregations. The lived experience of the synod on the part of such a substantial number of African bishops will prove an important factor for the implementation of the decisions of the synod and for facing its challenges for the gospel in Africa.

An innovation was the use of English, French, Portuguese (the three language of SECAM - Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) and Italian rather than Latin. At the explicit request of the Synod there was each day a short homily at the Ora Terza,
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a fact which illustrated the African love of the word of God as nourishment and as the light for the evangelizing and spiritual task. Two hundred and ten Fathers spoke in aula in addition to 14 texts "in scripts" (written interventions not pronounced in aula). Further, there were 19 Auditiones and various presentations: on Islam and the Family, on the International Year of the Family, especially in connection with the projected International Conference on Population and Development to be held in Cairo (Egypt) this September, on the English edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

For the first ten days, the synod worked in plenary assembly. The session began with the Report of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops on the preparation of the synod followed by the Relatio ante disceptationem by the General Rapporteur, Cardinal Thiandoum. The Fathers then listened to the interventions and the Auditiones, the content of which were summarized by Cardinal Thiandoum in a report called the Relatio post disceptationem. The assembly then broke up into 5 English groups, 5 French groups, 1 Portuguese group and 1 Italian group to discuss the reports and interventions so far made and to seek to formulate proposals. Each group elected a moderator and a rapporteur or a rapporteur and his associate. After the reports of the groups in plenary assembly, the General Rapporteur with the Special Secretaries and the rapporteurs of the various groups prepared the Elenchus Unicus Propositionum. This was again discussed by the groups, leading to the Elenchus Finalis Propositionum which contained 64 propositions offered to the Holy Father covering the five tasks of evangelisation in Africa in the third millennium, namely, proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace and the means of social communication.

A second phase of the synod will bring the Holy Father to three or four places in Africa where he will promulgate the results of the synod. Consultations are already afoot to determine the places and the time.

In what follows I shall seek to give an impression of the challenges from the synod based on the interventions and
documents; this essay will remain "preliminary", because the experience of the synod will take time to digest, further not all the documents are yet available for study.

2. Challenges to the Gospel in Africa

On the very eve of the synod, fratricidal violence erupted in Rwanda between the Hutu and the Tutsi. In one incident, Hutu soldiers entered a parish church in assembly. They systematically selected Tutsi whom they coldly shot or macheted to death. In that one incident, 63 persons lost their lives. The strife in Rwanda will give particular poignancy to the concept of Church as the Family of God on earth. During the synod, on 27 April, South Africa held the first democratic elections after 350 years of the system of Apartheid. There is hope for the transformation of the actual unjust situation, especially if Christians will unite in one voice based on the gospel. Two days earlier, elections in Italy swept from power the former Christian Democratic Party, now the Popular Party, and posed again the question of the responsibility of the faithful for the social order. From 4-22 April, a Commission finalized in New York a text to be voted in the International Conference on Population and Development which will be held in Cairo in September. Some of the contents affecting the family represented the cultural impositions from outside to which Africa has been subject. The family will become a major theme in the synod. On 24 April, the Holy Father beatified the Zairian catechist, Isidore Bakanja, martyred in odium fidei by his Belgian master, an event which underlined witness and holiness of life as the ultimate challenge of the synod and of inculturation.

2.1 Good News in a Continent full of bad news.2

The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who has faith (Rom. 1:16). The key word is salvation. In the African conception, salvation is abundant life, it is shalom, a state of harmony and total well-being
in body, mind and soul in relation to other persons, the society, entire creation and God. It calls for "a total evangelization, not only of persons but also of structures, concrete situations...". To show that henceforth the gospel must become Good News for humans in concrete situation in Africa, the Fathers requested the Holy Father to refer in his *Post Synodal Exhortation* to this situation as the backdrop for the evangelizing mission. The post-synodal Church will insist on the social relevance of religion, the transforming power of faith.

The Message (no. 41) paints the following picture of the situation: continual degradation arising from terms of trade, the use of Africa as a dumping ground by over-industrialized societies, imposition on our societies of socio-economic measures from abroad which lead to life styles that are contrary to the dignity of the African. All this results in crushing currency devaluation and international debt (no. 2). From within there are fratricidal strife and wars, corruption, lack of the Rule of Law, the "idolatry of ethnicity" (no. 36). In the face of these, the Bishops confess: we have not always done what we could in order to form the laity for life in society, to a Christian vision of politics and economics (no. 33). Hence education to the common good as well as to a respect for pluralism will be one of the pastoral tasks which are a priority for our times (no. 35). The synod demands greater justice between North and South (no. 32) and asks for a substantial if not a total remission of the foreign debt of African countries (no. 41). The Fathers commit the Church in Africa to justice in her internal life in so far as procedures, possessions and life style are concerned (no. 43.) To which, a synodal Father added "respect for the rights of women, openness to dialogue and consultation, priority for the poor".

2.2 The Church as the Family of God

The Good News is that we are the family of God! (*Message no. 25*). The same blood flows in our veins, the blood of Jesus Christ. In him, we are a Brotherhood, a "people made one with the unity of the Father, of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit" (LG 4). The waters of baptism must show themselves thicker than the bonds of blood. The post-synodal Church will try to recover the sense of solidarity and belonging, of unity and harmony, of sharing and participation implied in the concept of a family. It will fight tribalism in all its forms, for example, in the appointment of bishops.

The Church as Family of God takes concrete shape in Small Christian Communities (called Living Ecclesial Communities in francophone areas). They are places for treating the real problems of life in the light of the gospel, of promoting the responsibility of the members and learning to live as Church. In them the universal love of Christ breaks through all barriers. Their experiences and questions become raw material for African theological reflection. The experience of SCC's was not universal, but consensus grew as the synod progressed to the point of requesting that SCC's become the cornerstone of pastoral strategy in Africa.

2.3 From Mission Church to a Church on Mission

One of the most quoted phrases was Paul VI's, "You Africans, you are now missionaries to yourselves" (Kampala, Uganda, 1969). It was interpreted as launching Africa into world mission. The synod heard the invitation of Bishop Carlos Vieira, Bishop of Cartagena in Colombia: let us exchange our missionaries, sharing in our poverty. It heard bishops from certain places in Northern Africa pleading for African missionaries so that the Church will no longer be a Church of expatriates. It proposed "greater inter-ecclesial solidarity on the African continental level especially with those who are in difficult conditions and in suffering". The Church as the family of God will find it natural to share personnel and resources. An era of Fidei Donum pastoral agents, priests, religious men and women, and even laity is being ushered for Africa and other parts of the world. As the Message emphasized: all our local Churches are to burn with missionary ardour (no. 12) for the adventure of meeting Christ is characterized by an
irresistible desire to share that joy (cf. no.9). It is hoped that missionary institutes for world mission will emerge from the local Churches of Africa. The movement has in fact started. In 1968, a Comboni priest, Giovanni Morengoni, founded in Uganda the Apostles of Jesus, the first African clerical institute. A second followed in 1976, the Missionary Society of St. Paul, founded by the Episcopal Conference of Nigeria. At the moment there are at least 7 indigenous African institutes of Brothers and over 127 of Sisters.

2.4 Agents of Evangelization

When evangelization is seen in its role of transformation of minds and structures, it is not surprising that many Fathers tended to single out the family and the SCC's as primary agents. For these form the base of the social edifice, influencing it profoundly. The future challenges the Church to restore, in the altering circumstances of the day, the values of the traditional African family transformed by faith. Against the background of the forthcoming World Conference on Population and Development in Cairo the Fathers plead: do not allow the African family to be ridiculed on its own soil! (Message, no. 30). They continue: we condemn the enslavement of humans to money, the new god, through which pressure is put on the poor nations to force them to choose options in Cairo which are contrary to life and morality.

The image of the priest is that of a "man of God" (Relatio ante disceptationem, no. 9) with a vocation to spiritual fatherhood (Message, no. 25). He must launch out into the deep for Christ and not be just a "maintenance man" in an "established Church". In the Church as family of God, the role of the priest is to be an animator who does not take everything to himself. The Church will foster the participation of all in her mission. Hence a synod Father said: I call upon this synod firstly to recognize that collaborative ministry is an imperative, not an option, and secondly to allow local Churches to shape ministries adapted to their particular priorities.

"A certain idea of the Church produced a type of lay
person who was too passive...All pastors are invited to develop a pastoral programme in which the laity rediscover their proper place and importance" (Message no. 57). Hence the laity are not to be considered merely as supplying in a situation of lack of priests and religious, rather ministries are to be set up in the Church of Africa to enable them fulfil their priestly, prophetic and royal role. And they are to be given adequate training, including theology and sacred scripture, areas very often reserved for the clergy.

"To educate a woman is to educate people". Hence the African woman should count on the Church as the defender of her rights as a human person and the promoter of her role in social life, politics, economics but also as wife and mother. Traditional and modern prejudices against women derive from structures of sin. She is to be given access to all the social careers from which traditional and modern society tend to exclude her without reason (Message, no. 66). One of the proposals voted by the Fathers was: it is imperative that women be included in appropriate levels of decision making in the Church and that the Church establishes ministries for women and intensify efforts towards their formation.

The bible has a certain priority over the catechism in evangelisation; it ought to be considered the first catechism. Hence the synod proposes to put the bible into 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 becomes the reference point of evangeliser and evangelized.

2.5 Religious and Missionaries

Religious life in itself must be conceived primarily as a "mission", as a manifestation of saving love. Religious are invited to assume the profound values which make up the life of our cultures, thus giving "cultural hospitality to Christ, chaste, poor and obedient" (Message, no. 58).

A synod Father so described the difficulties of some indigenous institutes: low education of the members, lack of
well defined charisms, insufficient attention to religious formation. Some of these foundations duplicated existing ones; it would seem that some bishops consider in too facile a manner that they need to have their own religious for the needs of their dioceses. On the other hand, some international institutes were recruiting candidates without sufficient scrutiny, sometimes against negative recommendation on the part of the local Church. It was reported that some missionary institutes with no houses in Africa were recruiting candidates whom they bring abroad and that sometimes this is done without aference to the local Church. The synod was unanimous in demanding that the multiplication of institutes without definite charisms and apostolates should stop, also that institutes should not recruit where they have no houses. All religious are to be given a solid human and spiritual formation; provision might be made for human and spiritual formation; provision might be made for religious brothers and sisters to follow courses in the seminaries.

A preliminary report outlined the tasks of missionaries in Africa as follows: proclamation to non-Christians, the formation of christian communities who will become self-sufficient; the animation of local Churches towards a missionary spirit both ad intra and ad extra; the witness of total self-giving; the witness of universal fraternity; the mutual exchange and sharing of spiritual riches; the witness of a common life and solidarity between members of different ethnic groups and nations living in the one institute; a true fraternity and sharing of responsibilities between people of North and South.

In the collaboration between the local Church and missionaries, a concerted planning in matters of personnel between bishops and religious superiors is advised. Missionaries are requested not to compete with the local Church but to die to their own personal projects in order to assume her pastoral priorities and approaches. Bishops are nevertheless to recognize and foster the special charisms of institutes.
2.6 Inculturation and the Crisis of Culture

In the Middle Ages, the Church through the work of the monasteries helped in fashioning the new European culture. A similar challenge exists now in Africa. "The culture which gave its identity to our people is in serious crisis" (Message no. 15). Africans want a Christ who helps them discover their own African personality. Inculturation thus traces a triple fidelity in the changing circumstances – fidelity to the traditional values, fidelity to the morrow of Africa and fidelity to Christ and his message. The final goal of inculturation is holiness, a holiness determined by the particular values of the culture. Inculturation includes the whole life of the Church and entire process of evangelisation. It includes socio-political and moral life and Church structures. The synod however underlined the following challenges.

- the harmonization of traditional and canonical forms of marriage and the problems of many Catholics excluded from the sacraments because of their marital situation;

- the question of an African Rite or African Rites which the Relatio ante disceptationem (no. 17), basing itself on Ad gentes, 22, considered a matter of right and not of concession;

- the project of an African theology;

- the Catholic school, especially professional and technical schools, Catholic cultural centres and Higher Institutes as "privileged places for the remoulding of our traditional cultures confronted by modern rationality" (Message, no. 54).

- the development of traditional means of communications and their use in evangelization; the mass media as a world to be evangelized and as the bearers of a new world culture.
2.7 Formation for All

The work of effective evangelization is too complex for improvised action, formation is necessary for all. "The whole community needs to be trained, motivated and empowered for evangelisation, each according to his or her specific role within the Church". Also "ongoing formation must be provided for the whole People of God, priests, lay people and religious". Formation leads resolutely along the road to holiness, makes people truly human, well inserted into their milieu, equipped for the work of evangelisation and bearing witness to the Kingdom to come (Cf. Message, no. 49-50).

In the formation of the priest, intellectual formation is not to be privileged at the expense of the human and spiritual. This stress on the human and spiritual is characteristic. It presupposes a training which, founded on human virtues and values, makes candidates in touch with themselves and others and interiorly transformed into images of Christ the priest.

Four key words recur in the synod's considerations of formation: human, spiritual, missionary, inserted within the local ambience. Formation should make one human, holy, apostolic according to the state of life and fully rooted in the culture and in full solidarity with one's people and their circumstances.

Seminarians should, through manual labour and other means, share in the material life of the seminary. They are to be trained to appreciate their culture and to collaborate in ministry with the laity. Bishop Albert Tsiahoana cited an experimentation in priestly formation in Madagascar: candidates live together in very simple houses in the midst of the people and share their poor condition. They partly gain their living by cultivating their own rice fields. They have to look after their own house and their environment. The Fathers of the synod plead with seminarians and those in houses of formation: "be convinced that spiritual formation is the key to the whole of your formation.... Seminary discipline should become the self-discipline and the expression of your maturity"
A synod Father noted that whereas vocations are increasing in Africa there is no corresponding increase in good formators, rather in certain places their number, quality and preparation are unfortunately lacking. In the post-synodal Church, the formation of formators will be a priority, people capable of inspiring those in formation to give to the world the only reality it expects from them: God.

### 2.8 Dialogue

Perhaps because of the concept of Church as the family of God, dialogue within the Church emerged as a priority: between all groups of Christ's faithful, between the local Church and religious and missionary institutes, between the local Churches in Africa and the Church in other continents, finally dialogue with Rome especially on inculturation experiments and relevant ecclesial structures.

An appeal was launched to Muslims: "God does not want to be an idol in whose name one person would kill other people. On the contrary he wills that in justice and peace we join together in the service of life" (Message, no. 23). It was nevertheless noted that a distinction is to be made between Islam and Muslims and that fundamentalist Muslims are a minority which is as much a headache to the majority of Muslims as to Christians. The dialogue with the moderate majority of Muslims is to be intensified. Indeed the peace and stability of many places in Africa depends on this. Such dialogue can also be a bulwark against irreligious ideologies (for example, in the fight against amorality and for the values of the African family) and a force for the restoration of traditional values.

The contemporary ecumenical movement began among the African missionaries. When they realized that confessional divisions were hindering the evangelizing mission on the continent. The future could therefore depend on the commitment of the Churches in Africa. A synod Father even dared to hope that Africa would make a courageous
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effort for the re-unification of believers in Christ and that Christian unity for which Christ prayed might come from Africa.

A dialogue with the guarantors of our cultural values and of our traditional religion structured around the cultural heritage is strongly recommended in our local Churches (Message, no. 21). In this manner, the Church will enrich her life, hold on to the best in our traditions and help in the creation of the emerging new African identity.

2.9 Self-Reliance

In this connection, two facts were remarkable: the tone of the Fathers was that of awareness of self as responsible with and under Peter for the Churches confided to them by the Lord, also for the future of the continent; deriving from this is a second: the will to share, to support one another, to network with all useful agents in order to transform the situation. A new pastoral approach is born.

On the second day of the synod Cardinal Zoungrana opened the question of self-reliance: our African dioceses must form pastoral agents and faithful to count upon their personal contributions above all, so as not to build Churches of perpetual beggars. The Message was to corroborate this when it said: our dignity demands that we do everything to bring about our financial self-reliance (no.44). He demanded more faith in the bishops of Africa, more support for them while respecting their options and the priorities fixed by their pastoral plans. A solution would be to develop a true theology of temporal goods of the Church based on communion which is expressed by interdependence and material solidarity without damaging peoples dignity.

3. Conclusion – Africa in the World

The Fathers appeal against the negative image of Africa and generally of the black race (Message no. 32): there should be an end to presenting us in a ridiculous and insignificant light on the world scene.... The unjust
price system brings in its wake an accumulation of external debt which humiliates our nations and gives them a regrettable sense of inferiority and indigence. In the name of our people we reject this sense of culpability which is imposed on us.

The Fathers are henceforth prepared to network with groups within and outside their countries in order to make of the continent a society which has God for its builder. They call for a stop to arms sales to warring factions in Africa, on the IMF and the World Bank to alleviate the crushing debt, on the United Nations to intervene to establish peace in Rwanda, Sudan, Angola, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and parts of Central Africa. They demand greater justice between North and South and stable and fair prices for raw materials. They plead with Christians in the northern hemisphere to intervene with their governments and those responsible to stop arms sales to groups in conflict in Africa. They request them to see to it that due respect is given to Africa and Africans as well as those of them who have migrated to the northern hemisphere (Message, no. 40.41). They plead with African governments to move away from huge military spending and to put the emphasis on the education, health and well being of their people.

A bishop summarized the challenge of the gospel in Africa as follows: Hitherto the Church in Africa has not concerned herself sufficiently with these problems. Her preoccupation has been more with the "salvation of souls". A new direction in evangelisation characterised by genuine compassion for the people is called for. This new direction demands the involvement of the Church in the life struggles of the people. Such involvement entails risks in the effort to redress dehumanizing conditions and conform them to the will of God. It may be that the future African martyrs for the gospel will give their lives more for this vision of the family of God on earth than for a particular formulation of dogma.
1. The documents of the synod are the following:

**Before the synod:**
- the Lineamenta
- the Responses to the Questions of the Lineamenta
- the Instrumentum Laboris

**During the "working session":**
- the Vademecum Synodi which explains the synod process;
- the Elencus Partecipantium;
- the Report of the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops;
- the Relatio ante disceptationem;
- the Relatio post disceptationem;
- the Reports of the twelve commissions of circuli minores;
- the Elencus Unicus Propositionum;
- the Elencus Finalis Propositionum;
- the Nuntius or Message of the Synod.

**During the second phase of the synod and after:**
- Relatio post Labores peractos by the General Secretary;
- Promulgation of the fruits of the synod by the Holy Father in some form;
- Holy Father's Post-Synodal Exhortation;
- the Caprile Edition of the Acts of the synod
  Fr. Giovanni Caprile S.J., who died last year, edited the Acts of the Second Vatican Council and of all synods until his death.


7. Relatio ante disceptationem, no. 34.

8. Relatio post disceptationem, no. 6.


10. Cf. Relatio post disceptationem, no. 6

11. Relatio ante disceptationem, no. 28.


13. Episcopal Conference of Cameroons, Pre-Synod Seminar, Sangmelima, 10-16 January 1994, 47.


16. Relatio post disceptationem, nos 11-12


18. Relatio Post disceptatinem, n° 18.


20. Relatio ante disceptationem, no. 8.


24. Relatio post disceptationem, no. 25.
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The African Synod and the Model of Church-as-Family

Amuluche Gregory Nnamani

1. A Synod Review

1.1. On the Pre-synodal Events

The special synod of bishops for Africa, which Pope John Paul II proposed on 6th January 1989, took place in Rome between the 10th of April and the 8th of May 1994. Its five year period of preparation and one month duration of the actual sessions gave the African Church a singular opportunity to live and define herself. The heated debates that accompanied the preparation revealed much about the self-consciousness, expectations and apprehensions of the African Church, just as the events and the fruits of the synod sessions boosted its self-esteem, and raised hopes for the future.

The synod and all that went with it amounted thus to a single process of self-discovery. Not just the fears and hopes, but also the weaknesses and the potentials were exposed. Right from 1977, when the idea of an African Council was born in Abidjan, till 1989 when the expectation for a council had to capitulate to the reality of a synod, both theologians and bishops on the African continent were putting up with "differences in opinion". Among the bishops, this became most evident in the SECAM meetings of 1984 in Kinshasa and of 1987 in Lagos when directions became actually polarised. Their experience was a reminder, not only that different levels of self-consciousness existed in the African Church, but also that there were varied interests and visions about her future. Even though one should be courteous not to term this as disunity, it could be rightly maintained, nonetheless, that the failure of the bishops to evolve a common view about a council exposed the vulnerability of the African Church. There is no doubt
that a majority of the bishops would want the African Church to inculturate herself, as the events in the synod later revealed. However, being caught between the determination to define herself and the fear to initiate radical steps, she lacked the strength to resist external influence.

This state prevailed, when the papal proposal for a special synod of bishops for Africa came. As would be expected, the news was received differently, ranging from enthusiasm to disappointment. Those who never expected a special continental assembly of any sort for Africa accepted the Vatican offer with exuberance. Others who had anticipated an African council were displeased. Even without knowing exactly whether to blame fellow Africans or the Vatican for that, many considered it a miscarriage of Church decision. This generated waves of sentiments across Africa. Again, in what seemed like adding salt to injury, it was confirmed that the assembly was to sit in Rome and not in any of the suggested African cities. Many saw this both as an affront and as a disrespectful denial of Africa's right to self-determination.

However, as more information emerged, it became clear that neither the option for a synod nor the choice of Rome as venue was made arbitrarily by the Vatican. Apparently, Rome merely seized the opportunity offered it by the differences in opinions within the episcopal conferences. It is no secret that most of the episcopal conferences were not enthusiastic about the convocation of a council. For whereas a majority of the francophone episcopal conferences, who in the past preoccupied themselves with the issue of a council, were of the view that the time was due for an African council, others, especially the anglophone conferences, felt that Africa was not yet ready for an event of such dimension. About a third of all the continental episcopal conferences were even totally against the idea of a council. Thus, it was apparently the disagreement among the bishops and the consequent indecision that led to the papal option for a special synod of bishops for Africa.

Some other factors can also be suspected. According to
Engelbert Mveng, the issue of the African council was destined to be dropped along the line due to legal obstacles. The African Church, he says, lacks a continental body with legal rights to convene a council. SECAM, the only continental body uniting the various African episcopal conferences, is only a symposium. In that capacity, it does not possess the juridical status necessary for convening a council. The Latin American association of episcopal conferences has an advantage over SECAM, since the former has a legal status. Does this imply, one might ask, that the Pope would have no other option than to convene a synod, even if the African Church authorities had duly pressurised him to favour an African council? It is left to experts to confirm whether this legal aspect was very determinant in the decision-making.

Be that as it may, the awareness of these obstacles on the road to a council forced theologians and some Church experts to temper their discontent. Finding themselves in a state of complete disillusionment, many were no longer so much annoyed with the Vatican as with fellow Africans and with themselves. Shortly before the synod sessions, critics were even becoming better disposed to see the positive sides of a synod. For it dawned on many, especially as the storm of dissatisfaction began to die down, that a humble beginning with a synod is not all that a bad idea. With this realisation, the graph of expectations placed on a synod rose up to its highest level. The view prevailed that it was better to have a synod than not to have any assembly at all. This is after all the first continental assembly for the African Church involving Africans themselves, many people thought.

However, what brought consolation to those who were decrying the lost opportunity for a council was the much expressed hope that the synod could be seen as a preparatory assembly for a future African council. With this in mind, some participants went in for the synod, hoping to make the occasion a historic moment in the ecclesiastical history of the African continent. If bitter feelings remained in the minds of critics on the eve of the synod, it was not so much of disappointment, as of
apprehension about the possible interference of the Vatican and about the obvious limitation set to a synod of this kind.

1.2 On the Synod Sessions

Much of this fear was however dispelled as soon as the synod was opened. The three-hours opening celebration with the pope was conducted colourfully, not only according to the African taste, but also in a fashion that exhibited the various liturgical forms existent in the continent. If not for any other purpose, this liturgy helped to dispose the participants towards making bold interventions. Except for the unfortunate strategy of excluding many theologians from the synodal sessions – thereby forfeiting the contributions of the champions of African theology – the much feared Vatican control was not evident. An observer once commented with an air of regret that it was easier for Muslims and journalist than for theologians to get closer to the centre of high ecclesiastical discussions.

In contrast, the atmosphere in the synod sessions was more or less free from social and psychological pressure. Even the papers presented by the official Relator, Cardinal Thiandoum of Senegal, contained very courageous views on some volatile issues. Not very many people expected such a confident presentation of the African cause. His first paper helped in streamlining the interest of Africans and in directing further developments in the synod towards a fruitful conclusion. Much of what was later adopted were earlier well argued out in his relatio ante disceptationem. Similarly, many bishops made bold interventions without being castigated. But to the surprise of many, much of the inciting and courageous interventions did not come from the more progressive and adventurous francophone bishops, but from the anglophone East African bishops. The contributions of these bishops were commensurate with their elaborate preparations, which involved the Christians
at the grassroots.

1.3 The Post-synodal Atmosphere: between Despair and Hope

To all intents and purposes, the proposed "special synod of bishops for Africa" turned out, in many respects, to be a "special synod of Africans for the Church". Most of the participants came out satisfied and fulfilled, both for having finished their own synodal commitment and for having initiated significant steps towards evolving the future identity of the African Church. Some of the fruits of their deliberations are contained in the synodal propositions handed over to the pope for his ratification. Now, the African Church is patiently and apprehensively waiting for the proposed ceremonial declaration of the papal Post-Synodal Exhortation.

The content is yet unknown to the public, except of course the first draft, which journalists were able to lay their hands on, thanks to their connections, is something similar to the final text. Even if one were sure, a knowledge of the content of the propositions is of little significance. For it is well known, as critics emphasised earlier, that the best synodal deliberations remain proposals to the Pope and that what becomes "binding" is not what transpired during the synod, but what the Holy Father considers good for the Church. This is seen as constituting the basic limitation of a synod as compared to a council. In this light, it might seem premature for us to evaluate the contribution of the synod before the exhortation is proclaimed.

Yet it must be noted that the significance of a synod goes beyond the concrete propositions and the papal exhortation from Vatican. The message, the experience and the encounter are also very important fruits of the synod. To that effect, no matter what becomes of the propositions, the impact the encounter of 224 participants (35 Cardinals, one Patriarch, 39 Archbishops, 146 Bishops and 90 priests") left on the African mind is irreversible. It was a fruitful encounter that went a long way to strengthening the self-
consciousness of the African Church. This fact alone speaks volumes for the success of the synod. Moreover, its 71 points message to the world, Nuntius, adopted "with a thunderous ovation", equally highlights points, which show that the African Church is poised for actions towards an effective self-regeneration.

Judging from these signs of hope, it could be said that if disappointment was characteristic of the pre-synodal time, surprises upon surprises came to characterise the synod and the post-synodal atmosphere. Should this mean that all were satisfied with the synod? Far from that! The impressions left behind in the African mind can be anything but uniform. An African theologian described the post-synodal situation thus: while those who placed much hope on the synod "are now disappointed", others who did not expect much "are now surprised" about the overall result. This summarises, in my opinion, the average impression, which lies somewhere between disappointment and surprise, between despair and hope.

Despite the variety of individual impressions, the African Church is better counselled to gather the positive impulses released from the synod and make good of the hopes embodied therein. There is no point bewailing lost opportunities. If, as it is hoped, the synod could become a preparation for a future council, there is no doubt that the fruits of this synod will be a legacy for future continental ecclesiastical assemblies. It is left to theologians and African Church authorities to pick up the pieces and build the future on the available positive signs. Moreover, Africa has reasons to expect more words of encouragement from the forthcoming papal exhortation.

The synod "message" alone contains much enough impulse for the African Church to get on her feet. Reading between the lines, one encounters attempts towards the self-assertion of the African Church, one comes across more signs of hope than despair. For example, the appeal the synod Fathers made to African theologians for more research on inculturation (nos. 13, 14, 18, 56) and to political and church leaders for more justice and peace, in the "international economic order" (no.41) and in "the life
style of the Church" (43), respectively, are positive signs of hope. The same thing applies to their call for "the financial self-reliance of our churches" (no. 44).

However, the most outstanding sign of hope is, in my opinion, the synod's new ecclesiology: the concept of Church-as-Family. This is the "Good News!", the synod Fathers emphasised, that the people of God in the whole world constitute "a single Family of God" (no.25). Significant enough, they made this ecclesiology the starting point of their deliberations and passed it on to the post-synodal African Church for further exploration.

2. The Model of Church as Family: A new Ecclesiology?

2.1 Church as the Family of God: a New Idea with Roots in the Scriptures and Tradition.

The declaration of the Church as the Family of God is, in my opinion, the most significant contribution of the synod. This concept, which the synod attributes to African theologians (no. 56), is, however, not totally new to Christianity. For example, the Church is called the "family of faith" in Gal. 6:10 and the "household of God" in 1 Pet 4:17. Needless to say that the same idea finds its best expression in Mk 3:31-35, where Jesus calls those who do the will of God his "brother and sister and mother". Jesus' view in this passage definitely paved the way for the New Testament tradition of calling Christians the adopted "children of God" (Jn 1:12; Rom 8:16; Phil 2:15; 1 Jn 3:2). It also implies that heritage in the family of God is not strictly speaking biological, but mystical. Accordingly, the early Christian community understood itself as the family of God.

The views of two eminent African theologians, in the patristic period, on the Church as "mother" (Cyprian) and as "Instructress" (Augustine), presuppose also the understanding of the ecclesia as the family of God. Cyprian's argument that whoever has God as Father must have the Church as mother was meant to highlight the unity between God and the Church in form of a family.
structure. This is the background thought, even when it must be admitted that his view also anticipated Augustine's vision of the Church as a visible and invisible entity. Just as is obtainable among members of a family, the faithful automatically have obligations to themselves in their relations to God and the Church. The idea of the family of God is also implicitly expressed in the Roman liturgy, especially the liturgy of the Holy Week, and in the (sacramental) theology of baptism.

Despite the awareness of this motif in the scriptures, tradition and liturgy, the image of the family has, however, never received serious attention in ecclesiology. It is therefore the merit of the African synod to have brought this idea into the centre of ecclesiological reflection. For the first time, the family as such - not just the figures of "mother", "son" and the "holy family" - has been declared a model for perceiving the mystery of the Church. That the synod highlighted this model and called on the African Church to explore it is a sure sign of the determination of the synod Fathers to evolve the African Church of the future based on a value that is most basic in the African life-style.

2.2 The Significance and Role of the Family in the African Perception of Reality.

Nothing is more central in the life of an African than the family? His/her personality and vision of reality are largely defined in terms of his/her family association. His/her being and existence is not proved by thought as Descartes would want us believe, but by his/her family relationship. S/he is because s/he belongs to a family. If s/he does not relate to his/her family, a sense of emptiness or meaninglessness sets in. Even social groups get their meaning only in their relation to the families. The idea of the family evokes therefore concrete associations in the mind of an African, and relates him/her immediately to such values as life, blood-relationship, community, ancestral cults, the relation of the living and the "living-dead", duties and privileges. The image of the family for an
African is like a window that opens him/her up to the world of reality. It is a category of perception and conception par excellence.

Some writers in the West have been trying to puzzle out how the African synod came to the model of family. People are wondering whether it was motivated by the 1994 "international year of the family" or by the intrinsic African sense for the family. Though the possible influence of the world event on the synod cannot be ruled out, yet the adoption of family as theological model is presupposed by the centrality of family in the African thought and life-style. Hence, while the African consciousness for the family must have been touched by the crisis in the vision of the family today, the perception of reality through the imagery of the family is intrinsic to African world-view.

Cardinal Thiandoum testifies this fact as he says:

This concept, so often evoked in the responses to the lineamenta, has deep roots in our African culture. It also expresses the profound Christian and African values of communion, fraternity, solidarity and peace: For in a truly African family, joys, difficulties and trials are shared in a trusting dialogue.

However, all these values which the imagery of the family evokes are also implied by earlier ecclesial models, especially in the image of the Church as the "mystical body of Christ" (Vatican I) and "people of God" (Vatican II). It is well known for instance that the understanding of the Church as the "people of God" should improve the quality of the interrelationships between the laity, religious, priests and bishops. There is no sign that the African Church has translated these values expressed in the old models into effective modes of action and living. Neither can it claim to have exhausted other possibilities implied in these models. Bearing this in mind, one might doubt whether there is any need for a new ecclesiological model.

Yet it must be maintained that a new ecclesiology for Africa is not superfluous. It merely supplements the earlier
models. The Church is of its nature a mystery that eludes a precise definition. While no single model can exhaust the implications of this divine reality, every new one can bring new aspects to the limelight. Hence, changes in perception and perspective necessitate the adoption of new images and models, which are not meant to replace, but to supplement the existing ones. Thus, while old models retain their significance, new ones can arise, not necessarily as better descriptions, but evidently with new aspects of Church life. "Each model understands differently the mission, membership, leadership, and spirituality of the Church, capitalizes on different strengths, and guards against different weakness". 13

Every Church model has its point of emphasis. For instance, the vision of the Church as "our mother" stresses among other things, the caring, unifying dimension of the ecclesia. The qualification "bride of the Lord" stresses equally the relation of the Church to God. But if both models lay emphasis on the relation between God and the Church, the image of Church as the "body of Christ" tends to accentuate the unity of the faithful with Christ and among themselves. In this case, the idea of community is given priority. 14 Similarly, while Vatican I used the model of Church as the "mystical body of Christ" to emphasise the hierarchy, and the spiritual leadership of the pope, Vatican II employed the image of Church as the "people of God" to drive home the lesson that all the faithful - laity, religious and clergy - share a common heritage (LG 9 & 13). Openness of the Church to the world is here the point of emphasis. Of course, hierarchy retains its significance, but it is now seasoned with collegiality and co-operation (LG 18-29).

Thus, from the New Testament and apostolic era till this century, the Church has used different models to emphasise one point or the other. That most of them signify practically the same things does not actually count. The point is that each model illumines the same interests from different perspectives. For that reason, some of the significant elements coded in these earlier models appear in a different light when they are approached from the
standpoint of the African model of Church-as-Family. The idea of community, for instance, which is entailed in most of the models receives a new light, when it is expressed from the point of view of the African understanding of family. It makes a difference certainly whether I am called to belong to a "people of God" or to a "family of God". If the image of a "people" has the advantage of integrating all the faithful, that of a "family" excels in deepening the sense of belonging among members. This is not unimportant for an African whose sense of being, as said earlier, is determined by a sense of belonging. What the image of a "people of God" misses by emphasising the universal, the notion of the "family of God" gains by making the particular its starting point. For an African the idea of a people is empty, if it does not arise out of the family perspective. S/He moves from the particular to the universal and not vice versa. His/Her thought moves from the nuclear family to the extended family, up to the clan, and increases in scope till it arrives at the image of a people. If it is well directed, it can go on to include the whole world. There is no doubt that this can happen in Christianity if we pay attention to our common origin in Adam.

2.3. The Chances and Challenges of the Model of Church-as-Family.

The theological significance of the family cannot thus be over-emphasised; at least not when the import of the extended family is taken care of. Veritably, the African notion of family does not exhaust its significance in a nuclear family. The immediate and the distant, the living and the dead relatives are equally included. It is extended horizontally into distant relationship and vertically into mystical dimensions. It has also moral and spiritual connotations.

Does the traditional African notion of the family not open up a whole theological dimension, which, in addition to building a bridge between the mundane and the mystical dimensions, provides a platform on which Augustine's
The African Synod and the Model of Church-as-Family

doctrine of the visible and invisible Church could be profitably elaborated? For an African, the image of the family can best explain what the model of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ intends to say. Moreover, the whole issues in ancestral theology\textsuperscript{15} - descendance, blood relationship, Adamite origin, brotherhood and parenthood, the Trinitarian Persons, the proto-ancestororship of Christ, etc. - would be better coordinated within the framework of a family model. Apparently, the synod Fathers recognised the above points as they say:

It is for the Church-as-Family that the Father has taken the initiative in the creation of Adam. It is the Church-as-Family which Christ...founded by the gift of his body and blood.... (He) has come to restore the world to unity, a single human Family in the image of the trinitarian Family. We are the Family of God: this is the Good News! The same blood flows in our veins, and it is the blood of Jesus Christ. The same Spirit gives us life, and it is the Holy Spirit, the infinite fruitfulness of divine love".\textsuperscript{16}

In its mundane dimension, the African image of the family has got both moral and pedagogical implications. By virtue of the extended family, an African begins very early in life to be his/her brothers'/sisters' keeper, to see beyond his own personal needs. Is this not a natural exercise for the acquisition of skills necessary for community and interpersonal life? Of course, before the problem of urbanisation led to the erosion of some aspects of the African culture, the family was a place of learning. Moonlight stories and tales provided means for communicating positive values to the young people. In this light, our Christian ethics and pedagogy would look differently when the family becomes a model of interpretation. Extended family has definitely got its negative sides. However, our concern is the packet of values it presents, not its vices. The synod Fathers must have had all these in mind when they say. "The extended African family is the sacred place where all the riches of
our tradition converge" (no. 27).

The model of Church-as-Family does not only bring new chances for the African Church to explore theological realities with categories and from perspectives familiar to Africans. It also brings challenges. It challenges Africans to rediscover the values of the family, which urbanisation has terribly eroded. I strongly believe, that the synod Fathers do not have the current family structures in Africa today in mind, when they adopted the family as a model. This cannot be a good model, because in almost the same speed as in the West, African families are becoming atomised, and disfigured today through series of divorce and the like. The Fathers definitely had the image of the traditional African family structure at the back of their mind when they made this proclamation. If that is true, the Church is then challenged, as Cardinal Thiandoum hints, "to recover and promote the precious values of the traditional African family. This could be a great contribution to finding an effective response to the crisis of the family in many modern societies" (no. 17). This attempt has its precedence in the practice of the Church in 1850, when the adoration of the "Holy Family" was intensified in Europe and Canada so as to counter the then prevalent loss of interest in family life.17

Above all, by adopting the model of Church-as-Family, the African Church challenges itself to an examination of conscience. It is pushed to review its model of leadership and self-identity. For if the Church should be the family of God, the picture of the clergy and the episcopate in Africa must look different.18 The African Church leaders are therefore called upon to adopt the leadership style of the traditional family fathers, who, in anticipation of their eventful admission into the cult of ancestors, commit themselves to a life of truth and uprightness. This model calls in question equally the gap in the standard of living between some clergy and that of the poor faithful. The tolerance, especially in religious affairs, which is typical of most African families can be worthy of emulation. It is well known fact that in most families, Muslims, Traditionalists, Aladuras, Catholics and Protestants co-exist peacefully. Is
that not an issue for ecumenism?

In conclusion, it must be said that despite the turbulence in the pre-synodal period, the events in the synod sessions have yielded some positive fruits which brought signs of hope to the post-synodal African Church. The most important fruit of our *synod* or *journey together* is the new ecclesiology of the Church-as-Family. In the light of the significance and roles of the African notion of the family, this concept brings chances and challenges to the African Church. It is an image that can give Africans a new awareness and sense of belonging in the universal Church. The steps leading to the realisation of the Church as the family of God might of course be very heavy and weary, but they are no doubt the right steps back to the roots.

ENDNOTES


4. Cf. ibid., 112-128.


7. This will possibly be presented to the African public at "selected places in Africa" next year. Cf. The pope's closing message for the synod, "The Youthful Church in Africa", in Origins CNS documentary Service, vol. 24/1 May 19 1994, No.2.


12. Cardinal Thiandoum, op.cit. No.3


Thoughts On African Christian Theology Of Marriage And Sexuality

Paulinus I. Odozor

1. A Case of Traditional African Marriage.

I recently officiated at the wedding of a cousin of mine. The Church ceremony was the culmination of a process which began a few months back when Joe, my brother-in-law, came to my family to ask for Kelechi (kaycee as we fondly call her) in marriage. The two had met and known each other for some time. When Joe eventually 'popped the question' Kaycee took him round to some of her relations who mattered most in her life to find out what they thought of him. Questions were of course asked about Joe's character, his family, occupation, etc. My cousin was also asked whether and why she thought this was the man with whom she could be life-long partner in marriage. The family loves Kelechi deeply and would hate to see her suffer as a result of bad choice. Although it is not possible to predict the future with pin-point accuracy, one should at least try to forestall unnecessary and predictable hardships. Moreover, as the Igbo say, when one finger is dipped in the oil, the others also get their share of oil as well, whether they like it or not. Translated in the marriage situation, it means that the sister, or daughter, or cousin is never quite gone from the family as a result of marriage. Her joys in her new home continue to be her family's just as her sorrows affect her family and is shared in very real and concrete ways by them.

After this inner circle of family relatives had ascertained that Kelechi truly and really believed she would be happy with Joe, it was now time for the marriage ceremonies to begin. As a first step, Joe, with a few family members, had to come to our home in Amuchacha to make his intentions
public to Kelechi's entire family and kindred. Joe's family came calling several times, getting more acquainted with their new in-laws and each time bringing some form of gifts as stipulated by custom for the kindred and eventually for the village. The culmination of these visits came during the *igba nkwu* (literally translated wine-carrying) ceremony. Relatives and friends, far and near had been told far in advance of this date. Joe's family also came with as many relative and friends as could make the trip. When the visitors arrived, traditional pleasantries were exchanged and kola nuts were shared which among the Igbo is the basic expression of hospitality.

Then, Joe's father introduced his entourage to Kelechi's relatives and friends who had assembled for the occasion. This over, the oldest among Joe's relatives took over and declared to the people assembled, the reason for their visit. Speaking directly to the elder on Kelechi's side, Ehujor Ikulo, he told him that they had seen a nice young woman, a daughter from Ehujor's family whom they had taken a fancy to. Upon closer inquiry, they had also taken a fancy to her family and would like to 'open a road' between the two peoples. The man turned to his family who all supported his words with nods and noises of approval. Meanwhile Joe was seating there beside him extremely well dressed and grinning away like a man who had just hit the jackpot in a lottery.

His point made with eloquence, wit and proverbs, the old man took his seat. Ehujor cleared his voice and thanked the speaker for, among other things, the drinks which were now flowing like water. He pointed out that ultimately, a woman decides who to marry. Therefore it was necessary to make sure that she was choosing freely. He called Kelechi to his side and asked her if she knew the visitors, to which Kelechi answered in the affirmative. Did she know why they were there? "Yes", she said. If she approved of their visit, Ehujor continued, would she please signal her consent the customary way. The old man filled a glass with palm wine and handed it over to her. Kelechi collected the wine and went to look for Joe who had at this point been smuggled out of the assembly by his male friends. These
friends began to line up before Kelechi begging to share her drink. No luck for any of them. After a while Kelechi succeeded in finding Joe, sipped from her cup, and gave him to drink. Joe who is normally a total teetotaller accepted the cup and emptied its content in one gulp to the loud cheer of the people present. A throbbing dance step was struck and the two stepped out into the dance floor. The rest of the community joined in the revelry. More wine. Lots of food.

The merry-making continued until late into the evening. Before Joe's family left, the two families gathered for prayers presided over by the ancestors. At the ceremony invocations were made to the elders, and to the saints for the young couple. May they be happy together! May they be fruitful! May they have long life! May the 'path' which had been opened between the two families grow to become a big road! The elders took turns to offer their prayers according to their faith persuasions. I also took my turn to offer prayers. For, after all, I am an elder myself, in spite of my age.

1.1. Initial Reflections

The ceremony briefly described here is the culmination of an Igbo marriage ceremony. It does not by any means capture the entirety of traditional marriage among the Igbo. There are basically three steps in the Igbo marriage process. The first is the proposal during which, in the words of Ikenga R.A. Ozigbo, "the family of the prospective bridegroom visits the bride-to-be's natal home with customary gifts to ascertain the availability of the girl to marry the groom-to-be." A formal proposal is made at this time, and the would-be-bride is invited by the father or guardian to accept or decline the offer. The second step is the betrothal, during which the man makes a symbolic payment in cash to the family of the would-be-bride. Although this payment "appears to act as a necessary supposition for the validity and legality of marriage and as title to its fruits and rights," it neither gives the couple the right to sexual intimacy nor does it fully constitute
marriage among the Igbo. Only the third step which is being described above gives them these right. Although significant variations abound from one locality to another, even among the Igbo, and in spite of its being true, as Bishop Ukpo of Ogoja, Nigeria, said at the African Synod, that Africa is too big and complicated to warrant blanket generalizations, researches point to some common core experience from all over the continent on the issue of marriage.

2. African Theology of Christian Marriage

At the recent African Synod there were calls for an African theology of Christian marriage. This paper is an initial response to this call. In the search for an African Christian theology of marriage we are not proceeding on an entirely clean slate. Initially, I intend to discuss three of core characteristics of marriage in traditional African societies as positive contributions these societies can make to the understanding of Christian marriage. Next, I will go on to offer some thoughts on certain elements which ought to be considered important in any construction of a theology of marriage which is truly African and fully Christian.

2.1. Three Core Characteristics of Traditional African Marriages.

The first point to note is that African traditional marriage is an alliance between two families and sometimes between two peoples, as the story of Kelechi and Joe's marriage shows. As the working paper of the sixth general assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) on marriage held in Yaounde in 1981 notes, all over Africa, marriage is considered a vital ministry of the life and future of the lineage. It is not only a covenant between two persons but also one between the couple and their respective lineages.

"One family gives to the other something of itself by
giving one of its daughters... the other family acknowledges this gift by payment of a symbolic compensation. This is not a business deal, but a mutual commitment of each lineage calling upon fundamental human attitudes of confidence in the other."

It is wrong then to suggest, as Ifi Amadiume does, that marriage in Nnobi in Eastern Nigeria is tantamount to the acquisition of sexual services and the reproductive and labour powers of the woman. It is more correct to say that the new family of whom she has become a member usually regards her much more highly. G.T Basden noted this fact long ago in these words:

"What is generally forgotten is that it is not merely a man taking to himself a wife. It is more than that; it is the bringing in of another person into the family. She is something more than a wife; henceforth she is a member of the clan, and has her rightful place and share in all things pertaining to it."

The alliance between whole families which is apparent in the marriage of the couple in our story does not take away or diminish the individual's freedom of choice and interpersonal intimacy as some commentators sometimes imply. Lisa Cahill, for example, praises the recognition in African traditional marriage of the familial and social nature of the marital bond and its relation to parenthood as well as the progressive nature of human commitments. On the other hand, she faults it for what she considers to be its "devaluation of interpersonal intimacy between spouses in favour of marriage's communitarian and procreative contributions." Earlier she had praised the "Western marriage ideal" for recognizing equality, "especially as the freedom to choose a sexual, marital, or parental relation...". The inference then is that the community involvement in African marriages works against the individual's (especially the woman's) right to choose a marital partner and the "woman's role is seen almost
entirely in economic and procreative terms, and is subordinated to the interests and needs of husbands and fathers."

I believe the situation is much more complex than Cahill makes it out to be. As in the story of Kelechi and Joe above, the right to choose is an important element in the process of getting married. The couple has the advantage which western couples do not usually have of structural (familial, societal) help in the course of their discernment. Of course, familial and societal biases may sometimes play an undue role in the discernment process. However, the role of the community in the life of the young couple, especially the woman, is not just to safeguard "the interests and the needs of husbands and fathers" but especially to ensure her happiness and well-being in her new home.

A second common element in African traditional marriages is that they are processional. Thus, for example, to ask when marriage happens among the Igbo is a wrong way to put the question. Marriage does not just happen it evolves. The same is true in most African situations, as the following quotation from the SECAM document attests.

[Marriage]...is a whole process, a dynamic progression which advances step by step, each preceding stage leading to the next, right up until the moment when the bride is brought to the husband's home. This is the phase of the constitution of the marriage bond...Throughout this process, each party concerned has the possibility and the occasion for expressing himself, to bring forward his objections or to justify the merits of his point of view... In general, and in the ordinary way of things, the marriage is not concluded in one single ceremony in a somewhat perfunctory manner. The ritual is spread out both in time and space... 

As Lisa Cahill points out in another article, "the African form of gradual marriage carries with it at every stage an increasing level of personal, familial, and social weight and
More important than this, however, is the fact that this process forms a dynamic whole which affects the marriage. All aspects of the marriage process are important, to varying degrees. And because the various stages are an integral part of a ritual process, it seems to me they must be considered when the question of validity or the existence of a marriage bond is at issue. For, as the SECAM document points out, these various stages of African traditional marriages must not be confused with pre-nuptial rites nor be regarded as "trial marriages."

Finally, marriage in Africa is equally a sacred as well as a secular reality. A.G. Leonard once remarked that "it can be said of the Igbo as has been said of the Hindus, that they eat religiously, drink religiously, bathe religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously."

Leonard could also have added that they marry religiously, like most other African peoples. Getting married is like embarking on a journey to an unknown territory. The Igbo are aware how hazardous this journey can be. Therefore, the community, as in the case of Joe and Kaycee embark on a ministry of intercession for the couple. Marriage is therefore seen as a work of God in so far as it is a source of life.

2.2. Points To Consider

Perhaps the most urgent issue to consider in the attempt to fashion a theology of marriage which is fully African and truly Christian is that of creating one form of marriage (for Catholics) out of the existing three layers – traditional, civil and ecclesial. Bishop Raphael S. Ndingi Mwana'a Nziki of Nakuru, Kenya, summarized the problem quite succinctly at the recent African Synod.

Many of our Christian faithful have finalized their marriage in the traditional way according to the African customs of their own tribe but for different reasons independent from the will of either one or both partners, they have not yet come to the Church for sacramental marriage, even if in principle there is the wish to do this. In the meantime they are
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considered by the Church as living in concubinage because their traditional marriage has no canonical value. The consequence is that they are deprived of the reception of the sacraments...

Bishop Nzeki went on to suggest the recognition, "under certain conditions," of the traditional African marriage "as a valid form of marriage among Christians, which would allow one or both partners to have access to the sacraments of the Church." The form of marriage as we now have it is after all not a biblical heritage but something which has its origins in the Roman civil marriage. There is therefore "a theological possibility for the Church to reconsider the form of the sacrament as it has de facto happened in history". Moreover, since traditional marriages have social and civil values in African societies it is hard "for people to understand that a couple married according to their custom, having children and living faithfully, is still considered by the Church as living in public concubinage." It is no longer acceptable to consider people to be living in concubinage even after they are duly considered married by the society. The sheer cost of going through these layers of marriage is prohibitive. Cost apart, the situation drives many young men away from the Church and puts many women in very difficult situations where they believe and know themselves to be married and yet are not quite sure they should allow themselves to be pregnant, even if they wanted to, until the Church wedding day. Can we not dissolve this dichotomy between Church marriage and traditional African marriages?

African churches must also share the blame for the current situation. Christ did not institute a marriage rite. The Church did. This same Church has also instructed each conference of bishops to draw up their own marriage rites, if possible, according to usages of the locality. The instruction further states:

Among peoples where the marriage ceremonies customarily take place in the home, sometimes over a period of several days, these customs should be adapted to the Christian spirit and to the liturgy. In
such cases the conference of bishops, according to the pastoral needs of the people, may allow the sacramental rite to be celebrated in the home.\textsuperscript{15}

What is needed then is the courage to act. We should not be waiting for Rome to provide all the answers, especially in cases where a directive such as the above exists. It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to suggest such a rite. One thing should be clear. It must not be as individual-couple-centred as the present rite is. African traditional marriages are very community oriented. The community of faith should also play a much more significant (not in the sense of legislative or punitive) role than they currently do. Marriage catechesis, preparation and celebration must involve the faith-community in one form or the other. However, as we try to institutionalize the involvement of local ecclesial communities in African marriages care must be taken to come to terms with the dialectic of the social and personal interest in each marriage, since marriage is both a relationship and an institution. A few pertinent questions arise in this regard. For example, how can a couple put their stamp on their relationship while respecting the institution in all its ramifications - traditional and ecclesial? When must one draw the law in the process of discernment in view of a marriage partner between personal preference and community (familial, kindred, racial, even ecclesial) practices and biases?

2.3. Scripture and Marriages

African cultures, like other cultures are indeed \textit{preparationes evangelicae}, that is they contain pre-gospel values. Like other cultures they contain their fair share of distortions as well and are thus in need of the corrective vision that can come from the gospel. With specific reference to marriage, it must be remarked that no one culture totally embodies the Christian ideal of marriage. Nonetheless, the embodiments of this achieved by various cultures can enrich one another. Thus, in any assessment
of a culture's contribution to the idea of Christian marriage one must neither exaggerate the merits of the culture nor understate them owing to insufficient attention to the nuances of the culture in question. It is imperative then, in any reflection on an African Christian theology of marriage to consider ways the biblical understanding of sexuality and marriage with the anthropology it presupposes can influence the understanding of marriage and sexuality in modern Africa. Such a question would necessarily take us beyond the issue of the form of marriage to a consideration of what the scriptures can contribute to the social construction of sexuality in African societies.

Fundamental to the understanding of marriage and sexuality in the Judeo-Christian tradition is belief in creation. Creation is good and human sexuality is a profound good; a good gift given by God to human persons as part of creation. Although Christianity has not always clearly drawn the necessary lessons from the Incarnation it is also committed to the notion that Christ became human, even in his sexuality like us. As Philip Keane notes, "there is no exception clause asserting that sexuality was left out of the Incarnation." Christianity has never given in to the docetic heresy which spiritualizes the being of Jesus and refuses to accept his humanity as real. We confess Jesus as "true God and true man".

"That we experience God's justification or acceptance in and through Jesus Christ has profound sexual implications. 'The Word became flesh.' Jesus was a sexual being. And here is God's affirmation of our own sexuality."17

The Genesis account of the creation of the first man and woman reveals Israel's belief in the divine institution of marriage. "Marriage was thus a good and holy undertaking, bearing God's blessing in the structure that God intended it to have." It was also a relationship of equals. The author of Genesis notes that God's initial search for a companion like the man proved futile until God made the
woman. He brought the woman to man who burst out into song, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called Woman, for out of man this one was taken" (Gen. 2:23). Only woman is man's equal. That is why the sacred writer says she is taken from man's rib. "She is a human being as he is, a partner at the same level of life." Thus, as Schillebeeckx points out, "a servile submission of wife to her husband...was seen even in Genesis as a sinful situation, a consequence of and a punishment for the sin in Paradise (Gen iii.16)." In marriage, the couple become "one flesh" (Gen 2:24), an authentic personal community. They were to be co-creators with God: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." (Gen 1:28).

Generally speaking, modern African societies need a theology of human rights based on the creation account of all human beings in the image and likeness of God. Such a theology would stress the essential equality of every human person, regardless of gender, race or social status before God. It would be a sure foundation on which to anchor a truly African and thus Christian ethic of marriage and sexuality. In this regard, Ephesians 5:22-33 must be read with extreme caution in African marriage ceremonies. For although the New Testament author stresses also the fact of Christ's self-sacrificing love for his Church as paradigmatic for husbands, what seems to stay with many husbands in this part of the world is the fact of their headship and therefore superiority in the family.

One problem which can arise with this understanding of gender roles within marriage is that of violence against women in the home. At a wedding I attended last year, the preacher during the homily advised the groom to give the bride the occasional slap to beat her into submission, whenever the need arose. I heard this. I am not making it up. I never believed, until that day, that anyone could say such a thing from the pulpit. I do not intend to blame all domestic violence on preachers like this. However, the impact of such a 'sermon' on some members of the congregation can only be imagined.

In spite of a phenomenal rise in higher education for
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women in this part of the world our society has still a very long way to go in according women their full dignity as human beings. In the family most men as still dibuno or oga. Women have graduated from oriaku to the dubious honour of odoziaku (even when some of them earn as much and sometimes more than their husbands). The problem is structural and stems from a culture which often accords respect to the adult woman especially on the basis of her status as someone's wife. The tragedy of this is especially evident in the plight of widows, especially those with no male or grown-up children to take care of them.

What is needed is an African theology of the sacrament which both emphasizes the equality of the spouses and stresses their role as one of forming a post–Easter community vivified and led by the Spirit of Christ. Such a community would be a living witness to the egalitarian but complimentary intention of the Creator, who "in the beginning" made them male and female in his own "image and likeness." It would also be a community that waits in hope for its Lord and Master. Thus, marriage would be truly a sacrament, like the Church in whose sacramentality it shares. It would not only be a cause of ontological change in the couple, it would also bear witness to the rest of the world about the magnalia Dei.

2.4. Eschatological Critique

Another important element in any discussion on Christian marriage is the eschatological motif which many scholars have shown to be one of the controlling elements in the New Testament view on marriage and sexuality. The Christian community has always been aware of the passing nature of time. It is a community that awaits the return of its Lord. As Vatican II put it, the faithful of Christ is aware that "we have no lasting city here." These are the thoughts which condition the entire NT attitude to marriage and sexuality. This attitude does not imply that Christians are despisers of the world as some philosophers have charged and as some sects imply. It only cautions the Christian to have a healthy attitude to every human good,
including sex. Christians are called to be salt to the earth, light to the world. They are in fact urged, even as they await the return of the Lord, to help in building up the earthly city since the kingdom itself has irrupted into it.

When Paul enjoins Christians to marry "in the Lord" (I Cor 7:39), he includes marriage in humanity's new being based on baptism in the Lord. Even so, marriage and all other temporal states and concerns "are relativized by the coming of the Kingdom." Paul warns of "the impending crisis" (I Cor. 7:26). He would rather spare his audience the 'distress in this life' which comes from marrying"(Icor.7:28). He continues:

"I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away." (I Cor. 7:29-31).22

This stress on the imminent parousia not only relativises everything but also has an important bearing on how the community organizes itself and constructs its relationships, as have shown. It also explains a somewhat lack of a full-blown theology of marriage in the canonical Pauline letters. More important for our immediate purposes in this essay is the fact that it entails "radical witness in personal conduct" and self-sacrificing love in concrete relationships among persons. As Cahill further points out, "the eschaton (end time) stands in criticism of every present moral value and norm; by its standards humans are not only finite in their perceptions and projects, but also sinful."23

Marriages in traditional African societies are inherently dissoluble. Often the chief reason for their dissolution is childlessness. Sometimes polygamy is the preferred option. Some years ago, Eugene Hillman published a book devoted to the reconsideration of African polygamy "in the light of
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contemporary anthropology, biblical exegesis, and theological reflection." Hillman points out in his book "there are questions of justice and charity arising from the practice of "sending away" all but one of the wives of a polygamist who would become a Christian." Furthermore, he wonders about the meaning of the Christian kerygma "if the external observance of this particular law, no less than the faith itself in Jesus Christ, is made a condition sine qua non for admission into the Christian fellowship." Although these are legitimate questions to which answers must be found, on a case by case basis, especially in new mission territories, polygamy must be seen for what it is - an institutional framework for the subjugation of women. Although there may have been some reason for it in the past, there is no reason for it today. Africans value children. Sometimes, however, the stress on children has become inordinate and outrightly unchristian. An eschatological critique must be applied to the question of children in African marriages. While one must not minimize or caricature the sufferings of childless or sterile couples we must always bear in mind, as the document on reproductive technologies issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 1987 says, a child is not a right.

The child is not an object to which one has a right nor can he be considered as an object of ownership: Rather, a child is a gift, "the supreme gift" and the most gratuitous gift of marriage, and is a living testimony of the mutual giving of his parents.

3. Conclusion

Marriage as social reality predates marriage as sacrament of Christ's presence in the world. However, in the search for the Christian meaning of this reality, these two aspects of marriage as a real aspect of God's creation as well as a real aspect of God's salvation have to be seriously considered. Human culture enriches the gospel; the gospel
transforms and purifies culture in this symbiotic encounter.

As the SECAM document says, the issue in the search for a theology of marriage which is truly Christian and fully African is an attempt "to bring to the communion of the Church the riches which are proper to Africa to be shared by everyone." It is, as well, "a question of making a critical examination so as to draw out from the important modes of expression what constitutes the richness of the grace of Christ and the fervour of African faith." 28

In the first part of this paper I identified three important ways in which the traditional understanding of marriage in African societies can enrich the wider Church. The strong sense of community in African traditional marriages can, for example, be exploited to enrich our notion of marriage as sacrament.

A sacrament can never be a purely private or individual affair. As cultic manifestation of God's self-bestowal (grace) on the human community, it is a public celebration. As an invitation addressed to persons to share in this manifestation and in the fruits thereof it has a communal as well as a personal character. For although each individual is free to accept or reject the offer as individual person, he or she can only be an effective sign within the Church "in which Christ is the arch-sacrament." 29 Thus, given their community orientation and ability to unity several lineages and people's, African marriages can indeed be channels of God's grace, manifestations of Christian solidarity and avenues for active evangelization.

The gradual and graded approach to marrying can also be a check against hasty arrangements which often end up in divorce. If the involvement of whole families assures a support base for married couples, the evolutionary nature of marriage in African societies assures growth on the part of the couple and awareness of the social, ecclesial and personal implications of marriage. Finally, the religious tone in African marriages is a crucial safeguard against the tendency to treat marriage and life itself with banality and an attitude of consumerism which appreciates people only on utilitarian grounds.

The Christian understanding of marriage has to take note
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marriage and family as institution. I have already identified some of these forces above. In addition to these, a comprehensive christian theology of marriage in Africa must also address such issues as economics, population, technological advances, increasing opportunities for higher education for women, unemployment, etc on the structure of marriage and family in Africa. These issues, in the African context are bound to colour our theology of Christian marriage. The crucial point would be whether the theologians would have the courage to ask the relevant questions and whether the Church could make changes in its understanding of African cultures; and, where there are important insights to be shared, propose, for universal acceptance by the entire Church, legitimate practices related to marriage in Africa. Simply put, the question in this regard is whether the 'Africa thing' can also be a 'Church thing', and a truly catholic practice.

ENDNOTES


13. Much of the Church's understanding of marriage comes from the understanding of this institution in its western form. Even the much touted advances made in the understanding of this sacrament at Vatican II shares in this world-view. Thus, in so far as the definition of marriage in Gaudium et Spes is descriptive, it describes more the marriage of European and American societies. Lisa Cahill has isolated four factors which have helped shape this understanding. These include "a Western historical and social context" with its peculiarly patriarchal notion of kinship, individuality and sexuality; a "sacramentalizing tendency" which accepts human institutions and transforms them in distinctive ways into mediums and causes of grace; canon law, "the medium by which Western Christianity has controlled sexuality and protected marriage as an institution via juridical definitions; and finally, "a struggle to balance the physical and the interpersonal aspects of marriage. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Marriage: Institution, Relationship, Sacrament," in One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge, ed. John A. Coleman (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 103.

14. The influence of local European cultures on Christian understanding and celebration is well documented. See E. Schillebeeckx, Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), p.257. The wedding ring as the sign of the contract of marriage was of Germanic origin. The centrality of consent for matrimonial validity comes directly from Roman law, Ibid., p.241. See also Jean
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22. All biblical quotations in this work come from the *New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 1989).


25. Ibid, p.36.


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