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## My Hope as an African

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## MY HOPE AS AN AFRICAN

### Introduction

The logic of the Incarnation, the Son of God who took flesh and became human like us in all things except sin, tells me so much about the importance of context in the history of my salvation. It announces to me that my faith, mission, and destiny are definitively shaped by the fact of being an African. I did not choose to be an African. It is a gift that I received from the Creator of all things, who in his total benevolence put me into existence in this continent for a purpose. I was placed in Africa in the same way as every human being is put wherever they find themselves. I was not only born, but also brought up in the continent. All the basic fabrics of my human, intellectual, religious, spiritual and pastoral formation took place in Africa.

While already an African, I became a Christian, which introduced me into another broad family united by faith, hope, and charity. I happen to be one of those who became Christian so early in life. I was born into a Christian family but officially, I became a Christian only through Baptism which took place two weeks after my birth. So, I was first an African before I became Christian. At birth, I was named “Ikenna” (the power of God), but during Baptism, I received another name, “Bonaventure” (Good Venture/Future), which was either meant to replace or add to the African name that was given to me by my family. I have had these names that keep reminding me that I am truly African and truly Christian.

Being a Christian means for me a total commitment to the faith epitomized in the Christian Creed. Scripture defines this faith in relation to hope<sup>2</sup> and teaches that faith, hope, and love are three fundamental cords that hold together the life of a Christian.<sup>3</sup> Together, they constitute the theological virtues that bind every Christian to God, to other believers, and to humanity as a whole.

In this article, I wish to reflect on my hope as an African.<sup>4</sup> I mean to critically examine my hope in terms of its content and implications for my faith and love, as well as my entire life as an African today. This reflection focuses on the future that I see for myself, the church, and the people

of Africa. I would like to know if there is a future at all and what direction it will take, if there is any. If there are reasons for hope, our reflection will try to shed light on what should be done now to make the expected future a reality. This looking forward into my future and those who are related to me by faith, biology, and culture presupposes the importance of hope for faith and human existence in general. There will be no real commitment to any meaningful task in the present without hope.

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Since we cannot venture into the future without standing firm in the present to remember the past, this reflection kicks off by examining my experience of life in Africa today. Our attention will be on the experiences of our struggles and challenges, both as believers and as Africans, especially the ones that pose serious threats to hope. Against the background of these experiences, a consideration of some signs of hope will be made. Proposals will also be made in view of possible steps to sustain hope.

### **Challenges and Struggles**

Right from the start, it is important to note that Africa is a continent, vast and with variety of differences in culture, climate, worldviews, political systems, economies, and religions. This makes it highly impossible for generalized claims in matters pertaining to Africa and its people. It is also true that there are certain characteristics that run like threads through the continent, threads that permit affirmations that are to some degree generalizing. Moreover, thanks to research and the modern means of communication and information technology, events that take place in the remotest parts of Africa can easily be accessed without one necessarily being there physically. The country of my immediate experience is Nigeria and I will be drawing many of my concrete inferences from it.

### **A Continent Haunted by Its Past**

Here I shed some light on my experiences of struggles and challenges. I experience my continent as a people heavily weighed down by some past events, such as slavery and colonialism. Sometimes, the picture presented is that Africa had no problems until slave trade and colonialism, but the truth is that Africa never had a glorious past without problems. Like every human society populated by the descendants of Adam and Eve, candidates of Original Sin, Africans at all times have had to struggle with the ups and downs, good and bad, beautiful and ugly sides of existence. Slavery was in operation in Africa before the slave trade. Inter-community and tribal wars were common and there were obnoxious customs and traditions that militated against general human development.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the slave trade and colonialism devastated Africa in many ways. If these did not take place, it was expected that the different nations and peoples of Africa would have struggled through challenges to form societies bound by common laws and rules. Unfortunately, this sociological process was frustrated by slave trade and colonialism. The system of slavery that existed in Africa did not affect the population of the continent in any

significant way. That a man or woman captured during war from one community was kept or sold to another village did not in any way decrease the total number of persons in the enlarged group. On the contrary, the slave trade took away able-bodied men and women from Africa to a totally different continent, usually America. This left families without enough hands to farm, which in turn resulted in shortage of productivity and lack of food. In addition, the trade created fear, insecurity, and distrust among the people and this has been the case even centuries after the abolition of the trade.

The Europeans who came as traders, saw the abounding riches flowing in Africa and felt that the best way to take full advantage of it was to wield political power over the indigenous people. With this political interest in mind, they came up with a plan to maximize the opportunity of milking the continent. Africa was therefore partitioned at the Berlin Conference of 1885 and different nations of Europe took over the rulership of different countries of Africa. There were different styles of ruling the African people as there were colonial nations. The logic of partitioning and the different styles of governance helped to disintegrate Africa and to disconnect Africans from one another. Each African nation turned its loyalty and focus of association towards its colonial master. To keep a permanent hold on the colonized Africans, each colonizing country set in motion policies that ultimately worked against unification among the people of the countries, and ultimately among the different nations of Africa. So, at the end of colonialism, the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda as well as the Igbos, Yorubas and Hausas of Nigeria became enemies to one another. Political independence was not able to erase or heal the wounds of division and enmity created and sustained over a long time.

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What bothers me is not that there was slave trade or that we were colonized, but that we are still living in bondage of these past events. We are crippled and unable to get up from the point where these episodes left us. Why can we not break through this past? This bondage to the past has powerful impact on our political life.

### **Our Political Systems**

Instability is a common feature of all the political systems in Africa today. Electoral processes are marked by violence, thuggery, rigging and high-level corruptions. Votes hardly count because offices are allotted to persons prior to the actual elections. People hold political offices for as long as they want, and the ruling classes keep changing the laws of the land to enable them do this. Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Egypt, Cameroon, Sudan and many others are living witnesses of some of these political ills. Political parties are only names because they have no clear agenda and their members do not belong to them for the sake of any desire to make positive impacts on society. Selfish interests form the basis of operation of the State machinery and of the appointment of persons to public offices. Every election period seems to pose for the existence of the nation the serious question of “to be or not to be.” Oftentimes, the democratic system

is piloted by military men in civilian attire or by men and women who were born and brought up under military regimes. To this set of people, democracy is so strange. Political instability gives rise to insecurity, corruption, mismanagement of public funds, and all sorts of crimes. The sense of nationhood and patriotism is very low because people's loyalties go more to their ethnic groups than the nation. Ethnicity is a big obstacle to political stability.

### **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is strong in the lives of Africans. It was there before the coming of the colonial rulers, but the colonial masters helped to fan it into flames. Ethnicity is not a negative element in itself and it is not peculiar to Africa. Almost every people in the world once existed as ethnic groups. The formation of most nations took place by either a gradual or a forced merging of different groups. Different ethnic groups in Africa were forced into unions by the colonial governments to become what we know today as nations. Unfortunately, the same colonial masters did not understand the dynamics of the groups and there was also not enough time for the groups to coalesce into unified nations. In the end, many people in Africa see themselves more as members of particular ethnic groups than of their nation. At critical moments, one finds that their loyalties go to their groups and not to the nation. This has given rise to a very weak sense of nationhood in Africa, and thus patriotism of people in relation to their countries is very low. We are finding it extremely hard to rise above the bonds of ethnicity to become nation-states, and this has contributed so much to making us dependent.

### **Dependency**

Dependency is a very big challenge faced by almost all the nations of Africa today. We are politically, economically, culturally, religiously, scientifically, technologically, and academically dependent.

There is no African nation that practices a system of government that is indigenous to the continent. In the first place, we have been made to believe that Africa never had a system of governance. All we have and practice today as political systems is borrowed - the Presidential or Parliamentary systems of government, Socialism, or Communism. No wonder, what most Africans call political independence is in most cases a stepping aside but not a departure of the colonial rulers. The West has continued to play decisive roles in matters of the policies of governments in Africa. In some countries, they directly put persons of their choice in offices and remove them when they no longer serve their needs. African political leaders seem to be largely extended stewards of one foreign country or another.

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Economic dependency seems to be the worst of all. Weighed in economic scale, Africa is found wanting and this is the bane of all dependencies. We are gifted with all kinds of human and natural resources and yet we produce very little. For almost everything we need for survival in Africa, we turn to the West. We are the consumers of their goods including dangerous ones—arms. The vehicles, computers, aircrafts, electrical and electronic gadgets

and generators, and clothes used in Africa are products of the West. The economic situation in Africa gives rise to the dearth of local initiatives and to the mass exodus of both young and old men and women from the continent to other places. Africans love Africa but challenging situations force them to leave in search of greener pastures. We know that this sort of behavior did not begin yesterday, but the effect of this migration on Africa is devastating. I think of the number of people from Africa who die on the high seas in an attempt to cross over to Europe and I feel the pain of the humiliation and pain which thousands of us suffer at the embassies of various countries where we go for visas.

African dependency looms largely also in the area of science and technology. I was first introduced to the study of science and technology in the secondary school. We began with Integrated Sciences and later went into Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Agriculture and others. There was never a time we were told of any scientific law, theory, or breakthrough that came through an African. So, I grew up to believe that science and technology is exclusively not for us. This culture of dependency is made worse by the type of education system and programs we run in many African nations. The books we use and the ideas we are fed with are largely borrowed. A University in Nigeria, for example, requires its academic staff who want to be promoted, to have published articles in journals in Europe or North America. Conferences attended in such places are scored higher than those held in Africa. Does any University in United State require something similar from its faculty? Certainly, not. This is academic dependency.

Religious dependency is one of the glaring marks of the African continent. Christianity and Islam came into Africa at different points in time and gradually succeeded in weakening or almost wiping out the African indigenous religions. Today, when we think of religion in Africa, we think of these two foreign religions. In each case, Africa is made to see her salvation as what comes from outside its continent. We are either turned towards the West or towards the Arabian worlds for our religious authentication. Whether it is in Islam or Christianity, Africa has to look outside her territory to be told what right or wrong conduct is, what is sin or virtue, who is in heaven or not. In recent times, Africans are moving towards the East for their religious quest.

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Breakthrough in the areas of mass media, communication, and information technology is one of major marks of our age. Here again, Africa and Africans are dependent. The West controls the media and, to a large extent, uses it to impact negatively on Africa. It creates and disseminates horrible pictures of Africa such that what people associate with us are heavily negative: diseases, poverty, misery, war, or at best wild animals. We are flooded with obscene movies.

The cumulative effect on Africa of the experiences of the slave trade, colonialism, political instability and extended dependency is that most Africans suffer from inferiority complex. This “illness” shows itself in different forms: feeling of inadequacy or of not being good enough, low self-esteem, loss of faith in ourselves as individuals or as a people,

preferring people and products of other continents to our own, and even self-hatred.

In the face of all these, hope seems to disappear and despair appears a better option. Is there really any hope of a better Africa for me and my brothers and sisters in the continent? In what follows, I will focus attention on my reasons for hope.

### Why Hope?

In one of his writings, Gerald O' Collins observed that "looking back on our theological past is to see how much Christian theologians and philosophers have neglected the exploration of hope."<sup>7</sup> I agree that sufficient attention has not yet been given to the place and role of hope in human existence in general and in the Christian life in particular. The twentieth-century will be remembered, among other things, for engineering the rediscovery of hope in Christian faith. Christianity is a religion built on hope, this is a character it inherited from Judaism. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David is a God of promises and fulfilment; he makes promises and is out to fulfil them. This character of the God of Israel finds profound expression in the prophetic tradition that culminated in Jesus. The central message of Jesus Christ was the kingdom of God<sup>8</sup> — a reality which has dawned in history and yet whose ultimate fulfilment is expected in the future. Therefore, the future is the key for understanding the actions of the God of Jesus Christ in the past and now. The early Church lived in hope of the Parousia and prayed that Jesus should return without delay, Maranatha. However, on account of many factors which includes the delay of the coming back of Jesus, believers were forced to make adjustments in terms of interpretations to explain and accommodate their experience. Over time, the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith started to wane, until it reached a point where it became eclipsed.

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Thanks to theologians like Johannes B. Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, hope was rediscovered, restored, and assigned its rightful place in the history of God's pilgrim people.<sup>9</sup> For Moltmann, the human being is one who hopes, and people are always seeking something that lies in the future. Thus, the future is the only problem of the human being. Therefore, theology is not faith seeking understanding, as St. Anselm said, but hope seeking understanding. Moltmann states that "the eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith..."<sup>10</sup> The Second Vatican Council, in the opening words of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes* speaks of the joys and hopes of God's people in time<sup>11</sup> and goes even further to shed light on the hope for perfection of happiness for humanity that transcends the progress of the present world.<sup>12</sup> In November 20, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI published his second encyclical titled, *Spe Salvi, Saved by Hope*.<sup>13</sup> This title was taken from Rom 8:24 which states: "For in hope we were saved..." In this encyclical, the Pope sheds light on the connection between hope and human redemption.

My hope as an African is founded on this understanding of the foundational nature and role of hope in human existence, as well as in Christian faith. In the face of all the

challenges and struggles which the African Christian faces today, do I really have any hope or reason for hope as an African Christian? This is the major question which my reflection wants to address now. In what follows, I would like to establish some of what I see in Africa today as basis for hope.

### **Beacons of Hope**

Scripture has it that “faith of itself, if it does not have good works, is dead.”<sup>14</sup> One would also say that hope without concrete beacons is both deceptive and utopic. My hope as an African has a number of positive guiding lights which I now present.

It is said that charity begins at home, and I would say that hope too does the same. The Spiritan International School of Theology (SIST), Attakwu, my mission place at present, is one of the great beacons of hope I see in Africa today. This is a seminary and a school of theology and religion established in 1987 by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and run by the Spiritan Circumscriptions of Anglophone West Africa. It was primarily erected to train future missionaries, but also to provide quality theological education to men and women of the consecrated life and the laity who wish to deepen their understanding of faith or to prepare to play various roles in the church as pastoral agents. Right from its inception, it was clear that SIST was an experiment in many ways. It set out to provide Africa with a place for doing theology in context and for the meeting of peoples and cultures. It is an experiment on the promotion of the values of internationality and interculturality within the African Continent. The students and staff of SIST are usually from over ten different African nations, more than twenty-five different language groups, and fifty ethnic and cultural areas. These people live, work, celebrate, and suffer together. Consecrated and lay men and women constitute part of the teaching staff, and except for things that are specifically designed for the clerical state, the consecrated and lay men and women students study side by side with the seminarians. Masses are celebrated in different languages every week and differences are not only accepted but appreciated and celebrated in ways that contribute to the growth of the entire community. SIST is a family. SIST gives me the hope that African men and women, priests and laity, the young and old from different cultures, languages, nationalities, and religious congregations can live and work together to achieve a common project. The successful experiment of internationality and interculturality taking place in Africa (SIST) offers a model worthy of emulation even by people from other continents. We are capable of creating and sustaining fellowship for productive existence in Africa.

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Secondly, history tells me that Africa and its people played and have continued to play important roles in the church and the world. We do not have to go far to speak of Jacob and his household who were saved from extinction by migrating into Egypt (Genesis 46), or how Moses was born and brought up in the same country (Exodus 2), or how Jesus was not only saved but got his early formation in Africa (Matt 2:13ff). The contributions of Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine to the development of Christian faith are worthy of

note.<sup>15</sup> Today, we have the likes of Cardinals Francis Arinze, Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, and Robert Sarah who play very important roles in the church. While I was writing this paper, the World Cup 2018 in Russia eventually came to an end. France took the golden cup with a team overwhelmingly constituted of players of African origin. This performance of the French team tells me that given favourable environment, Africans would do even better than their Western counterparts. We have a number of Africans who are star medical doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, accountants, and computer scientists in different places in the world. One would not fail to mention the appearance of President Obama on the political scene of the United States of America to become the number one citizen in the nation.

Furthermore, the vibrancy of the Christian faith in Africa today gives me hope. There are obvious visible expressions of faith in Africa. Vocation to the priesthood and the consecrated life keeps rising in many African countries. In Nigeria, for example, there are over twelve major seminaries and a number of them have over four hundred seminarians in them. This gives rise to the ordination of many priests every year. Africa is feeding the world with missionaries; dioceses and missionary congregations send out priests and religious to different places. Gradually, the church gets even financial support locally. The number of dioceses, parishes, ministries, and services is all increasing. These are signs of hope. They, however, require that every effort is made to keep weeding out elements of corruption of Christian symbols from our expression of faith in the continent, and that inculturation is pursued as a common project by all.

The conviction that increased religiosity in Africa is a sign of hope is supported by what I know to be the contributions of Christian religion to human history. I know that Karl Marx, Friedreich Feuerbach, and people in their school of thought will not agree with me because for them religion has no real value in society. On the contrary, history reveals that without Christianity it would have been difficult to talk about Western civilization, or things like the equality of human beings, human and religious freedom, the abolition of slavery, the promotion of family life and marriage, and of positive attitude to work. Even to-date, the church has continued through its social teachings to shape the minds, policies, and actions of people and governments in the world. In most African societies, the church has been at the forefront of the development of peoples and their cultures particularly through education, medical services, and the option for the poor.<sup>16</sup>

*...increased religiosity in Africa is a sign of hope...*

The emergence of acts of indigenous creativity in the wider African society gives me hope. In Nigeria, for example, one can see signs of hope in the levels of creative ingenuity taking place in cities like Aba, Onitsha, Nnewi and Lagos. These are places of indigenous productivity in the country. Shoes and dresses produced in Aba compete favorably with those manufactured in Europe and America. Motor parts fashioned in Nnewi stand the test of the standards of imported ones. These are signs of hope.

Ultimately, my hope as an African is strengthened by the faith that God is with us. Sometimes, when I think of Africa, the story of the journey of Jesus with his disciples

across the sea (Mark 4:35-41) comes to my mind. It was in the evening, and Jesus wanted them to go across to the other side of the lake. On their way, a strong storm of wind came against the boat to the point where the disciples feared they were going to drown. In the meantime, Jesus was sleeping, with his head on a cushion. They woke him up and he calmed the storm. He, however, reprimanded them for their lack of faith which was the cause of their fear. How would they be frightened when they had the lord of the universe with them? Jesus promised that he will be with us until the end of time (Matt 28:20); again, he sent us the Holy Spirit to be with us forever (John 14:16). The presence of God with us through Christ (Emmanuel, that is, God is with us) and the Holy Spirit is the rock on which my hope as an African is built.

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While these beacons are my guiding light of hope, I strongly feel that much more should be done to enable Africa get to the Promised Land. Below are some of the steps and directions or things to do to secure what I see as the hope for Africa.

### **Which Way?**

I see my hope as an African in a church and continent that are more self-reliant, more self-supporting, and more interdependent. We cannot keep leaning on the West as if we were disabled, handicapped, or crippled. My hope also directs me towards African nations that provide enabling environment for inculturation and the growth of indigenous technology, and whose citizens are more patriotic, detribalized and holding to nation building as their common project. I see my future in Africans that believe in themselves and do not rely on outsiders to solve their problems. Interdependence calls every African person and nation to develop herself to the fullest and then to get connected to other persons and nations. Here, emphasis is on development, communion, fellowship, and the sharing of resources, skills, talents, and values with one another. Thus, selfishness, individualism, and egocentrism are enemies to the future of Africa.

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Communion in the African Church means that the diocesan clergy and the religious, bishops and priests, the lay and the clergy, men and women, the young and the old would join hands, heads, and hearts together to work and witness to the gospel. In society at large, the logic of communion demands that different nations, ethnic groups, religions, cultures, and ideologies come together to pursue and uphold common goals for the good of all in the continent. Beyond the continent, communion demands pooling resources together, networking, diplomacy and dialoguing with people and organizations that can contribute meaningfully to our growth. Jürgen Moltmann rightly observes that “to be alive means existing in relationship with other people and things. Life is communication in communion. And conversely, isolation and lack of relationship means death for all living things, and dissolution even for elementary particles.”<sup>17</sup>

Most importantly, Africans should find in the Holy Spirit a speedy road and vehicle towards the attainment of its dreams and goals. Everything that Africa needs for a positive transformation can be located in the Christian belief, understanding, and doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Among these are life, the power to be and do, courage to embark on transformative agendas, communion, creative skills, good leadership, comfort, and restoration. The Holy Spirit is the source of all these. Moreover, the Holy Spirit can serve as a symbol that can bring together all the various religions found in Africa today. There is hardly any known religion in Africa that does not have belief in spirits or the Spirit. So, using it as point of entry, effective inter-religious dialogue can take place.

Finally, my hope is that the green pastures of Africa which are already germinating like a mustard, would mature and grow abundantly great so that, like in the days of Jacob and his children, or of Joseph, Mary and Jesus, all the nations of the world will troop to our continent in search of greener pastures.

## Conclusion

I really do not know for certain what my future as an African will be or what the future holds for me, for the church, or for our continent. Sometimes, I feel scared and tempted to give up or to migrate to another continent. I have not yielded to this temptation because I see credible guiding lights of hope in Africa. These guiding lights sustain my faith and empower me to commit myself unconditionally to the mission of charity which, I believe to be my call as a human being, a Christian, a religious missionary and a priest. While my heart is gladdened by these beacons of hope, I am convinced that certain concrete steps have to be taken now for the good of Africa's tomorrow. Above all, my hope is rooted on God who is with us through his Son Jesus Christ and in us by the Holy Spirit. I hope that we shall work together with God and among ourselves to overcome our present challenges and build up a continent according to his will and of our desire. In the same way, my hope is that, our Lady, Queen of Africa, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who believed that the promises made to her by the Lord will be fulfilled (Luke 1:45), will mentor and intercede for us, and that under her patronage we shall reach our goal. This is my hope as an African.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I was over thirty years old when I first left the continent of Africa for Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hebrews 11:1 where it is said that "faith is the realization of things hoped for and evidence of things not seen." -

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor 13:13.

<sup>4</sup> This theme comes close to one of the major works of Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, first published in French in 1985 under the title *Ma foi d'Africain*. The English

edition was published in 1988 by Orbis Books. Ela, a post-colonial Cameroonian theologian and sociologist, decided to question his Christian faith as an African. This is close to what I intend to do here but using hope as my compass.

<sup>5</sup>The killing of twins, the subjugation of women, and different kinds of caste systems are good examples.

<sup>6</sup>It was famine that drove Jacob and his family to Egypt where they lived for about four hundred and thirty years.

<sup>7</sup>Gerald O'Collins, "Theology of Hope," <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/084Collins.pdf>, p. 262, accessed, July 15, 2018.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. John Fuellenbach. *The Kingdom of God: The Message of Jesus Today*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, where this idea is profoundly discussed.

<sup>9</sup>Note that scholars like Ernst Bloch, a German Marxist philosopher born in 1885, influenced Metz and Moltmann and thus should be acknowledged for his contribution to laying the foundation for the renewal of interest in the Christian theology of hope.

<sup>10</sup>*The Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (tr. J. W. Leitch). London: SCM Press, 1967, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39.

<sup>13</sup>*Spe Salvi* is epochal, because for so long a time there has not been such papal teaching on Christian eschatology.

<sup>14</sup>Jas 2:17.

<sup>15</sup>Bishop Gabriel Mendy has a good summary of the contributions of these three African Church Fathers in his article, "The Contributions of the African Fathers of the Church to Pneumatology" in the *African Journal of Contextual Theology*, 6 (2016) 5-44.

<sup>16</sup>This position does not support some of the aberrations that go on in Africa in the name of religion or the understanding of religion that deemphasizes the value of human creativity, effort, and productivity. This is what gives rise to superstition and occultism and the craze for miracles.

<sup>17</sup>J. Moltmann. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*. Eng. tr. Margaret Kohl. London: SCM Press, 3.