

## **IMMIGRATION FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHURCH AS FAMILY OF GOD THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

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*Ecclesia in Africa* defines the Church as “God’s family on earth (...) the living sign and efficacious instrument of universal solidarity for building a world-wide community of justice and peace”<sup>1</sup>. This is in line with the sacramentality of the Church. According to *Lumen Gentium*, “By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind”<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, *Ecclesia in Africa* understands the aim of the new evangelisation as “building up the Church as Family, avoiding ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups, favouring solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular churches without ethnic consideration”<sup>3</sup>.

What role can or does immigration play in this new understanding of the Church as Family of God? Going through the allusions of *Ecclesia in Africa* to the issue of immigration, it is surprising that the document has difficulties in attributing a positive role to immigration in the construction of the Church as Family of God. Rather, immigration receives a negative presentation. *Ecclesia in Africa* talks of the exile of the youth to foreign countries because of the situation of poverty (n° 115). It decries the situation of refugees forced out of their homes due to conflicts and wars (EA n° 119). When the document addresses the participation of young churches in the “universal missionary work of the Church”, it lays emphasis on the official sending of African priests and missionaries to other continents (EA 129 and 130). Later in EA

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa*, n° 114.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium* I

<sup>3</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa* n° 63.

131 the solidarity among Churches takes a precise official name, “organic solidarity”, and is placed under the umbrella of the Pontifical Mission Aid Societies.

Drawing from experience of the African Migrants’ Pastoral in France, this article wants to show, over and against the negative perception of immigration, that migrants have been playing a major role in the renewal of the missionary projects of the Christian Church in Europe<sup>4</sup>. It contends further that immigration has theological implications for the construction of the Church as family of God.

### **African Migrants’ Pastoral: communities on mission**

African Migrants’ Pastoral in France has been a laboratory for the experimentation of the Church as Family of God. This pastoral ministry forms part of a larger ensemble called *La Pastoral des Migrants* which is a trust of the French Episcopal Conference to help migrants become part and parcel of the Church in France. This National ministry is directly under the care of the *Comité Episcopal des Migrations et des Gens du Voyage*” which coordinates the the pastoral for migrants under the French Episcopal Conference.

I had the privilege of being a chaplain of African Migrants Pastoral in Rennes from 1993 to 1998 and in the Diocese of Nanterre from 1999 to 2005. The principle is that small African Christian communities are set up in different parishes. It has to be said from the word go that though the ministry is called African Migrants’ Pastoral, meetings in several places gather people from different cultures – African, Haitian, French Antille, and indigenous French citizens themselves. These groups are signs of fraternity in the Church.

Through these communities Africans contribute to the animation of the parishes in liturgy, catechumenate, and parish council. In most of the communities, Africans have formed African intercultural choirs that revitalise the Eucharistic celebrations.

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<sup>4</sup> The whole contribution of African missionaries officially sent to Europe is left out because they are not migrants in the true sense of the world.

Because of their presence, many parishes have formed the habit of organising inter-peoples' celebrations. At the end of every celebration, they share a meal together. This sharing is done in the African way, in that everyone cooks and brings the food to the common table. Many women come with full pots of various African dishes and put them together.

One must not hide the difficulties African Migrants' Communities meet, namely, resistance from some conservative French parishioners and priests, xenophobia from extreme right wings of the society. It must be said also that some Africans complicate issues for themselves by mutual suspicion. Some of them indulge in fraudulent practices that tarnish the image of the African continent. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to recognize that in these communities Africans no longer consider themselves as simple migrants, they understand themselves to be missionaries called to participate in the construction of the mission of the Church in which they find themselves.

The mission of the members of African Migrants' Communities does not end in the animation of parishes. One major concern of these communities is solidarity. Solidarity is expressed in many concrete ways: care for the sick, presence to the bereaved, reconciliation of divided families and ethnic groups, support to illegal aliens and asylum seekers.

### **Care for the Sick**

African Migrants' communities try to provide room for listening to and assisting the sick and the depressed. Many migrants in France develop one kind of sickness or the other because of the situations in which they live. The competitive society produces dislocated people. Having left their homes and traditions, they cannot rely on solid traditions in the context of modernity. They are then obliged to draw resources from themselves to face the competition in the society, unemployment and sometimes failure. This is why some go into depression. Often there emerges accusations of witchcraft and sorcery which in most cases help to explain away the existential dislocation the person is going through.

African migrants communities try to address these issues by providing “*lieux d’écoute*”, that is, places where people can be listened to. By so doing, they make it possible for people to voice out their frustrations and sufferings. They organise visits to the sick and try to console them as much as possible. The prayer sessions and sharing of the word of God in homes or Churches are always powerful moments of personal healing.

### **Presence to the Bereaved**

Accompanying the bereaved is no less a vital mission accomplished by the African Migrants’ Pastoral. Many Africans are disarmed when they lose one of their own. Being far from their country, they cannot accomplish rituals of purification and widowhood according to their traditions. Most of the time, the first worry is how to get the money to take the corpse home. When this is not possible, the problem is how to explain the situation to those at home. Those who live in apartments in the big cities cannot even cry for fear of disturbing their neighbours. So the tears are suppressed and one knows the psychological consequences of the repression of tears.

African communities organise Christian wake-keepings in the parishes and when there is no space in a Parish they rent a hall. They then pull out the bereaved family from the small apartments and cry together with them in a Christian way, through songs and prayers.

### **Ministry of Reconciliation**

Many people’s hearts are blocked by wounds and hatred. Many couples are facing communication problems between themselves or with their children. It is a known fact that African couples divorce more easily in Europe than in their home countries.

Sometimes, it is the problem of communication among ethnic groups. Any conflict in one African country has immediate repercussions on the relationship between different ethnic groups coming from that country. The civil strife in Côte d’Ivoire has created confusion and even hatred among those from the North and

those from the South. The war in the Democratic Republic of Congo has sowed enmity between the Congolese and the Rwandans. The quarrel over the Bakassi peninsular has created suspicion between Nigerians and Cameroonians.

One must not hide the problem of racism that Africans face in Europe. The increasing exploitation of the issue of immigration in political campaigns in France does not help the situation. France woke up on 23 April 2002 to see the leader of the *Front National*, the extreme right party, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the second round of the presidential elections. This makes African migrants feel threatened and ill at ease. It influences their interaction with indigenous French citizens.

However, African communities in France succeed in bringing different African ethnic groups together. These communities act as catalysts for reconciliation. They reconcile Africans with Europeans and with European cultures. I remember the story of a Sudanese. We had to intervene several times on his behalf so that the social security agents could process his papers. Every time he came to meet me, he would tell me, "My brother, you are one of us you should understand that this people do not want to help us". On the other hand, when I call the social security assistant in charge of him, she would tell me, "Please tell your friend to be patient. He should understand that we have procedures to follow and laws to respect". The work of the migrants' pastoral is thus to bridge the gap between these two worlds. Today this Sudanese friend still writes to thank me for helping him understand the French mentality and system. Now, he is doing the same work of intercession for others.

### **Support to Migrants in illegal Situations**

The greatest challenge facing the African Migrants' Pastoral is the situation of many brothers and sisters that have come to be known as « sans papiers », i.e. those who have no papers or simply illegal aliens. This is a very complex situation. Without denying the fact that some Africans in this situation contributed to it in one way or the other, we must recognize that the series of laws passed by

different governments in Europe are simply unjust.

What is more alarming is that these people do not have access to the basic amenities necessary for life. Many live in hiding for fear of the police. The African Migrants' Pastoral works with different associations, Amnesty International, *Secours Catholique*, etc, to help these brothers and sisters have access to the basic amenities necessary for their daily living. They are also helped to have access to lawyers and social assistants so as to organise their files and channel them to the right structures. This is done in accordance with the directives from the French Episcopal Committee for migrants, which itself toes the line indicated by Pope John Paul II: *"Today, the migrant in an irregular situation presents him/herself to us as a stranger in whom Jesus asks to be recognised. Welcoming and expressing solidarity with him/her is an obligation of hospitality and a way to show our fidelity to our identity as Christians"*<sup>5</sup>.

We have tried so far to show that despite the shortcomings of the Africans in Diaspora, African Migrant communities participate in the mission of the Church in France. They not only take an active part in the animation of their parishes but they venture into the delicate mission of solidarity with the poor, the sick, the afflicted and the outlawed who are normally marginalised in an increasingly globalized world. Mostly they help in reconciling individuals and families.

In that sense they accomplish the mission that the African Synod and Vatican II assign to the Church as Family of God. The activities of migrant communities contributed to the positive understanding of the mission of migrants by official documents of the Church which in turn challenge the Church to rediscover her true identity.

### **Immigration Challenges the Church to Rediscover her Identity**

The reality is that the contribution of African migrants in different

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<sup>5</sup> See Comité Episcopal des Migrations et des Gens du Voyage, « Quand l'étranger frappe à nos portes »

levels of the Church especially in the Parishes has led the Church in Europe to really rediscover her prophetic voice and question her fidelity to her identity as Church of Christ, Family of God. It suffices to examine two documents, namely, “*Les étrangers en situation illégale en Europe*”<sup>6</sup>, issued by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral of Migrants, after the meeting convened in Munich, from September 29 to October 1, 1994, and *Un peuple en devenir*, emanating from the French *Comité Episcopal des Migrations*, 1995<sup>7</sup>.

Almost concomitantly with the African Synod, the Pontifical Council for Migrants’ Pastoral issued a text addressing the situation of illegal aliens in Europe. While recognizing the right of nations to regulate immigration in their respective territories, the document takes a clear stand against xenophobia, the exclusion of illegal aliens from the societies and the deprivation of their rights. It also condemned the use of foreigners as scapegoats to explain away the socioeconomic crises facing contemporary European countries:

The Church for whom every human person has an inalienable dignity for the fact that he/she is constituted of the image of God cannot accept this exclusion and affirms that even in an illegal situation every human being is a subject of the rights (“*sujet de droits*”).

This declaration is in tune with Jean XXIII *Pacem in terris* 1963, n° 25 which affirms the inalienable right to immigrate and emigrate, the fact that every human being belongs to the universal community. This right is also recognized in the catechism of the catholic Church, n° 2241.

The text states clearly that the Church is called to continue

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<sup>6</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral of Migrants, « *Les étrangers en situation illégale en Europe*. Final text adopted by the participants at the meeting convened by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral of Migrants, Munich, September 29- October 1, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Comité Episcopal des Migrations, *Un peuple en devenir*, 1995.

Christ's mission which is "to gather in unity the scattered children of God" (Jn 11, 52). Christ came to inaugurate a new communion in the Father's love, a communion open to all human beings"<sup>8</sup>. It reaffirmed that the criterion of membership to this communion is the observance of the word over and against social and religious affiliations.

In the light of this reflection the document declares the primacy of human life over every legislation. The principal reference remains Jesus' declaration that "The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath" (Marc 2, 27). In that sense human beings cannot be scarified in the name of law.

In 1995, a document, *Un peuple en devenir*, emanating from the French *Comité Episcopal des Migrations*, toed the same line with the Munich document. The difference is that it brings out clearly the position of the Church in France and it recognizes the positive contribution of migrants to the progressive constitution of the French society as well as the Church in France. The boldness with which this document recalls the memory of the gradual composition of the French society throughout its migration history is amazing. First there was the migration history of the Picardians, the Provençals, the Britons, the Lorains and the Alsatians. Then came the time of workers from other countries – Belgians, Italians, Polish, North Africans, Black Africans. These workers were brought officially into France to reconstruct the country after the Second World War and to develop her industry. France owes to this stage of migration her large population today and the plurality of her identity as well as her success in many fields, economic, sports, culture<sup>9</sup>.

Borrowing from Paul VI (*Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, n° 2), the French bishops affirmed that from the mobility of peoples emerges a new and more vast surge for the unification of the whole universe. It states clearly that migration favours and promotes reciprocal knowledge of one another and strengthens the fraternal

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<sup>8</sup> "Les étrangers en situation illégale en Europe », p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Un peuple en devenir*, p. 18



rapport among peoples. Following this, the bishops reaffirmed that the Church in France is “the Church of all those who live in France without distinction of the colour of their skin, origins, customs or culture”<sup>10</sup>

The bishops perceived clearly that the challenge is to become together the Church of Christ. That is why they encourage the Migrants’ Pastoral to refuse two extremes. The first is total assimilation which leads to the neglect of the originality of different cultures that compose the French society. The second is juxtaposition which celebrates the differences to the extent that people form ghettos and refuse the necessary communication among communities. The Migrants’ Pastoral is expected to be a sign of catholicity: “that is, to let the communion that gathers its members draw its strength from the faith in the same Lord and from the gift of the same love”<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Migrants’ Church as Family of God**

From the above analysis of the experiences of African Communities in France and the two official Church documents whose writing was influenced by their experiences, it can be inferred that these communities bring the Church back to her true identity as Family of God.

The ecclesiology of the Church as Family of God insists on the fact that all are children of God. As stated by Nigerian theologian, Elochukwu Uzukwu:

“The Church-family in which we live is not an association of clans and ethnic groups, but a brotherhood and sisterhood beyond the frontiers of blood relationship, clan, ethnic group, or race. A primordial uprooting is needed in order to be admitted to membership in this new family (...) all those who are born into this Church-family through water and the Spirit, coming

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 50. This position was recently reaffirmed in another document of the Comité Episcopal des Migrations et des Gens du Voyage ». *Quand l'étranger frappe à nos portes*, 2004.

from whatever race or nation, are bonded together through the victory of the Lamb”<sup>12</sup>.

This truth tends to be masked by nationalism and cultural pride especially in areas where the Church is deeply rooted in the local culture. The benefit of immigration then is that migrants interrupt this cultural domestication of the Church and force the local Church to rethink her identity.

Obviously the Church is drawn back to the biblical efforts to point towards the community of destiny of all peoples in the economy of salvation. It was during the exile that the Hebrews reaffirmed the brotherhood of all men and women and their filiation to Abraham. It was also from the exile experience that they developed the perspective of the universal gathering of all peoples and nations in the land promised by God himself (Isaiah 60, 3).

This community of destiny for all peoples was realised in the event of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This event, as the Church confesses, opened the universal love of the Father for all human beings without distinction of race. Jesus’ mission consisted in going from place to place searching for the excluded and communicating to them the communion to which they are called.

Meditating on Jesus’ death and resurrection Paul celebrates the universal love poured out for all,

But now in Christ you who used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules

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<sup>12</sup> Elochukwu UZUKWU, *A Listening Church. Autonomy and Communion on African Churches*, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1996, p. 67-68.

and decrees of the Law. This was to create one single New Man in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the cross, to unite both in a single Body and reconcile them with God. In his own person he killed the hostility. Later he came to bring the good news of peace, *peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near at hand*. Through him, both of us have in the one Spirit our way to come to the Father (Eph 2, 13-17).

Paul expressed this communion inaugurated by Christ in other places, “you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors; you are citizens like all the saints and part of God’s household” (Eph 2, 19). He says again, “there is no more distinction between Jew and Greek, slave or free, male or female” (Gal 3, 28).

The Church as Family of God is thus called to become the sign of the destiny of all peoples, namely, the communion with God and with each other. Nourished constantly by the body and blood of Christ, the Church confesses that all human beings have God as Father and that this Father wants to gather all together as his family, in his Son through the Holy Spirit. Maintaining this identity is a great challenge to today’s Church.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued all along for a positive appreciation of the contribution of immigration to the construction of the Church as family of God. It focused only on the experiences of Catholic African Migrants’ communities in France. A similar study could be done on the side of other Christian communities, like the Pentecostal Churches which spring up everyday in France and are championed by Nigerians and Congolese. They all participate in one way or the other in the mission of the Church.

In the present globalized context of divisions caused by conflicts, fratricidal wars, racial quarrels and nationalism, the Church needs a more eloquent language than communiqués and official declarations. If the Church wants to contribute to the construction of the unity of humanity, she must question herself on

her capacity to construct this unity *ad intra*. If Christians want to help reconcile the world, they must show that they are capable of living together as Family of God. By facing this task boldly African Migrants' communities in France are contributing to the construction of the Church as Family of God, sacrament of the unity of humankind in God.