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The Mission ad gentes of the African Churches

Introduction

The church in Africa is the fruit of the sacrifices of many foreign missionaries from different European countries. Apart from the early centuries Christian presence in North Africa, the next effort to evangelize the rest of the continent was during the fifteenth century Christian expansion but especially in the nineteenth century missionary efforts in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the African church which is often regarded as the object of mission has assumed the agent of mission in its own territory and often beyond. With the Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa already celebrated, the church in Africa received a new impulse to renew its missionary duty and challenges. As Pope John Paul II said in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*: the Synod was convoked in order to enable the church in Africa to assume its evangelizing mission as effectively as possible in the Third Christian Millennium. In fact, the dynamism of African churches in mission ad gentes was already echoed by Pope Paul VI at the closing session of the Symposium of African Bishops in Kampala, Uganda (1969): "By now, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves. The church of Christ is well and truly planted in this blessed soil." "Missionaries to yourselves", means that henceforth African Christians must continue, upon their continent, the building up of the church. This is a call to bear witness to Christ and to make him known to all those who have not yet received the gospel message. In this way they will come to love and follow him, because in him is the life and salvation which the Africans and indeed the whole humankind very much need.

In this short write-up I shall highlight those aspects in which the African local churches have assumed the needed responsibility for the mission ad gentes in the continent.

Evangelization and Church formation in African churches

The Vatican Council II missionary decree ad gentes defines mission in its two-fold aims of evangelization and church formation (AG 6). The Council's missionary juridical system of *mandatum* which replaced the *ius commissionis* also empowered the local bishops as fully responsible for evangelization in their dioceses. The missionaries are to enter into contract with bishops in whose dioceses they wish to serve (AG, 26; CIC, canon 790). This new approach is centered on the Council's theology of mission as reciprocal activity between sister churches. In other words, the Council developed a theology of co-responsibility in evangelization and of trust on the local churches. This is a rediscovery of the local churches as the primary agents of mission. But how have the African local churches been carrying out this role of being agents of mission? Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum of Dakar, in his capacity as the General Relator of the Synod Bishops for Africa presents the African churches approach to the mission ad gentes. According to Cardinal Thiandoum, evangelization is at the center of the missionary activity of the African churches today. It is first of all "Good News", as the very word connotes. It is the proclamation to the world of the good and joyful news that God, who loves us, has redeemed and is redeeming his world through Christ. In its method and aim, therefore, evangelization must seek to give Good News to the world, and in particular, to peoples of Africa and Madagascar:

In a continent full of bad news, how is the Christian message "Good News" for our people? In the midst of an all-pervading despair, where lies the hope and optimism which the Gospel brings? Evangelization stands for many of those essential values which our continent very much lacks: hope, joy, peace, love, unity and harmony. Africa is in dire need of the gospel message for through the Gospel God builds up his family.

In this regard therefore, the African local churches operate with a positive and integral concept of evangelization as clearly set forth in the relevant official documents of the church. It involves, no doubt, the preaching of the Word, inviting hearers to accept Jesus and his saving message and to enter into his church. But it is wider and deeper than that. It includes the transformation of human society through the message and living witness of the church and her members. It is therefore that what the Gospels refer to as the "Reign of God" which comes about: promoting peace and justice, restoring human dignity and bringing this world as close to God's designs as possible. Evangelization touches all human beings and every human person, as also every aspect of human life. In the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II considers

evangelization in its three different situations: mission ad gentes, pastoral care and new evangelization, all of which are realities of major importance. In the African context, one often speaks of phases of evangelization which sometimes overlap. These are: primary evangelization whereby the gospel is brought to those who have never received it, pastoral care of those already in the church and witness of Christian living as a necessary implication of our faith. John Paul II has, in recent years been calling for a new evangelization, "new in method, new in expression and new in zeal. There is need to work out what this means in the context of the different local churches of Africa.

Another striking characteristic of the African local churches is the attempt to view evangelization from the perspective of a missionary activity which aims at building up the church as the family of God on earth. This is an effort of the Africans to define the Christian community in terms which are perceptible to them and which are rooted in the gospel, Christian tradition and the cultural ingenuity of the people. The concern is about founding local churches which would express the profound Christian and African values of communion, fraternity, solidarity and peace. For in a truly African community or family, joys, difficulties and trials are shared in a trusting communitarian spirit and dialogue. The missionary activity ad gentes aims at formation and solidification of local churches. With the erection of many dioceses in different parts of the continent, the African local churches are occupied with deepening the faith already received and of expounding its areas of influence and ministry throughout the local territory. Thus, in the magisterium of the African Bishops at the Synod, the relevant image of what evangelization is all about in the African context is seen in the building-up of the church as the family of God on earth. Evangelization invites humanity to participate in the very life of the Trinity, calling it to return, through the Son, in the Spirit, back to the Father "so that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Therefore, one of the most acclaimed achievements of the African Synod is this evaluation of the image of the church-as-family of God (an extended or universal "Family of God). It is the key for understanding and evaluating the documents of the Synod. It is an ecclesiology developed in the context of proclamation and evangelization with its inspiration generally from St Paul the great missionary. The inspiration is specifically from Paul's letter to the Ephesians on reconciliation of the Jews and the Gentiles with one another and with God (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22). The image of the church-as-family is a concept which Africans can easily appreciate and identify with, because of its African value of extended family, bound together by ancestral blood and community life. The communitarian accentuation of the family makes the new model a real African reading of Vatican II concept of the church as communion or as the people of God (cf. LG, 3). It is an African cultural heritage which, if properly studied and applied, has many pastoral advantages especially for the African local churches. John Paul II invites the African theologians to work out the theology of the church-as-family of God with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the church.

Concrete Efforts and Experiences

From the fore-going discussion it becomes clear that the actual missionary effort in Africa aims at building up the church-as-family. But for such a church to exist, we must have: a) priests who live their priesthood, b) Christian families that are authentic domestic churches, and c) ecclesial communities that are truly living (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 86-98). In spite of some difficulties and open problems, however, the missionary efforts in African churches have started to yield some positive results. A remarkable feature of growth of African local churches is the birth of indigenous hierarchy, missionary institutes and religious congregations, along with a formidable lay faithful. Though there are patches of foreign missionaries in some parts of Africa (which demonstrate the universality of the church), yet, nowadays Africans have started to take responsibility for the churches in their land. Addressing the Fathers of the Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa, Cardinal Josef Tomko (the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (to whom almost all the African local churches are still dependent), gave the following statistics: "In Africa today there are 412 ecclesial jurisdictions, excluding 18 circumstances dependent on other decasteries; 66 of these are under missionary bishops or other missionary orders; 327 are governed by African bishops (to whom must be added 15 auxiliaries). In all Africans constitute 90% of the total number of bishops in Africa today".

The reality of indigenous hierarchy in the African churches, is as a result of increase in priestly and religious vocations in the continent. A recent Statistical Church Year Book shows that, while the population of Catholics in Africa stood at 130,018,000 (the total population of the continent estimated at 688,176,000), that of the priests and religious stood thus: diocesan priests, 16,962; religious priests, 10,203 (total – 27,165); professed religious (non priests), 52,583; lay missionaries, 1,222; catechists, 385,897; candidates to the priesthoods (seminarians), 20,383. All these point to the fact that in Africa, seminaries, novitiates and other formation houses are very much alive.

In addition to the formation and catechetical centers, higher ecclesiastical institutes or faculties of theology have been also founded in different regions and countries of Africa. These include: Institut Catholique d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ICAO) at Abidjan, Ivory Coast (canonical erection: 12.08.1975); Catholic Higher Institute of East Africa (CHIEA) at Nairobi, Kenya (canonical erection: 2.05.1984); Facultés Catholique de

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (canonical erection: 25.11.1987); Institut Catholique de Yaoundé, Cameroon (canonical erection: 15.11.1991); catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) at Port Harcourt, Nigeria (canonical erection: 9.05.1994).

Another fact about the African churches is the founding of many religious institutes or congregations. Some of these are: the congregation of Our Lady of Kilimanjaro (Moshi, Tanzania); the Handmaids of the Child Jesus (Calabar, Nigeria); the Benetereziva Institute (Burundi); the Benibikira Congregation (Rwanda); the Bannabikira Congregation (Uganda); the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ (Nigeria), the Apostles of Jesus (Moroto, Uganda); the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary (female wing of the Apostles of Jesus (Moshi, Uganda); Missionary Society of St Paul (Nigeria); Brothers of St Stephen (Onitsha, Nigeria), and so forth.

Furthermore, the actual Church Year Book shows that Africa has the greatest increase (137.4%) on the scale of the number of baptized faithful across the world between 1978 and 2000. While the total population of Catholics in Africa stood at 54,759,000 in 1978, representing an increase of 7.24%, and at 81,883,000 in 1988, representing an increase of 9.13%, in 2000 the continent registered a Catholic population of 130,018,000, representing an increase of 12.44%. This shows that Africa is the fastest growing Catholic zone in the world, "where the increase has been 50% in the last ten years".

However, the increase in the numerical strength of the local hierarchy, priests, religious, and the lay faithful does not mean that African churches have achieved the needed adulthood in their growth. African churches are yet to utilize the autonomy granted them as particular or local churches, for the development of acceptable forms of liturgical celebrations, theologies, spirituality and moral. They are yet to develop African structures for church organization. Generally, church structures in Africa are still as at the earlier phases, modeled on the mother-churches of the pioneer missionaries. Basically, this type or situation renders the local churches of Africa very dependent on the mother churches on which they were modeled.

However, some efforts have been made in some of the local churches towards inculturation. An example is the Zairean local church which developed its "form for the celebration of Mass. There are also the Cameroonian Mass (which enjoys the approval of the local bishop); the Eucharistic Prayers of East Africa, and the ritual for the consecration of virgins in Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo). Apart from these, similar efforts are emerging in other parts of Africa. For instance in West Africa, there are particular ways in which the Eucharistic celebration is turning native among the Ashanti, Yoruba, and the Igbo groups. But the emerging liturgical contribution of this region to African Christianity and to the universal church is in developing Christian passage or transition rites. This region has consequently produced a very well-developed adaptation of traditional initiation rites to the received Christian rites (the Moore ritual in the diocese of Dieboungou, Bourkina Faso); a Christianization of traditional naming ceremony (as distinct from baptism) among the Yoruba of Nigeria; and the Christianization of Igbo (Nigeria) patterns of passing through crises in life with adequate rites that heal or enhance relationship (igba ndu, ritual covenanting). Also in Central and east Africa afflictions by witches, evil men, and spirits may be resolved by participation in charismatic prayer that is widely diffused in this region and indeed all over Africa.

However, the emergent liturgies of these areas are concentrating on the Eucharistic celebration and consecration of virgins. In West Africa, experiments geared towards celebration of the Feasts of Corpus Christi and Christ the King are emerging. For instance, among the Ashanti of Ghana the Corpus Christi celebration is adapted to the Odwira festival (the yearly outing of the Asantehene, the Ashanti king). It is a ceremony suffused with color and meaning. The same emergence of the king has been integrated into rituals surrounding the consecration during the Eucharistic Prayer. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the same Corpus Christi festival is celebrated as Ofala Jesu (Jesus' annual outing as king) with fanfare, cannon shots, song and dance, etc. Another rather striking adaptation among the Igbo is the introduction of patterns of cooperative development or improvement unions into the rite of the "presentation of gifts" during the Eucharistic celebration. The most dramatic display of this kind of presentation of gifts is on Holy Thursday (Christ Mass). It has become a fundraising strategy to ensure a self-reliant church. Offertory hymns are carefully worked to inspire participation.

All these efforts are accompanied also by theological reflections in the African local churches. The emergent theological concepts in Africa are expressions of the way in which Christians of the continent are trying to interpret the Christian message and to provide models taken from their own situation, their own culture and their own experience as a people for an African reading of the Christian mystery. The theological reflections are therefore efforts of evangelization. They reflect the commitment of African Christian theologians to relate the Christian message to the socio-cultural, religious political and economic reality of the continent. The main currents of African theology are: inculturation and liberation (human promotion), each with its own currents and cross-currents. In this context inculturation concerns discussion on the encounter of the gospel with African cultures. The theology dwells on the role of cultures in evangelization and studies ways of deepening the Christian faith in Africa. Liberation theology in Africa (which develops in its three main currents: 1) an African liberation theology developed in an independent Africa; 2) African women liberation theology, developed as a reaction against the injustices women are subjected to in traditional society; and 3) South African liberation theology, born as a protest against racial ideology), concentrates on problems of poverty

and social realities, on structures for creating political and economic stability and on the self-reliance of African local churches and society. This theology is attentive to the oppressive cultural effects of traditional and modern Africa, and to elements of racial and color discrimination.

To the credit of African theologians it must be said that among all aspects, Christology is the one that has received most attention, since the decisive element of every Christian life lies in the response that must be given to the question Christ asked: "Who do you (African Christians) say that I am?" (Mt 16:15). It is a well known fact that Christology is the most fundamental aspect of Christian theology. Therefore, every particular church must give its own explicit answer to this question, in a real contextual manner. Without a correct understanding of the person of Christ, of his nature, of his significance and of his message addressed to the human race, Christianity lacks authenticity. Therefore, in recent times there have been many Christological models that come from the pen of African theologians. Christ is called the liberator, the ancestor, the first born son, the master of initiation, the healer, the African king, the African chief, the mediator, the savior, the give-of-life, the African lover, the all-powerful redeemer, etc.

New Challenges

In addition to the above efforts of evangelization in African local churches, there is need to indicate few aspects that are of particular importance for an authentic Christian witness in the continent. Here I will like to highlight formation of priests and religious and building the relationship in mixed African communities.

Formation of indigenous clergy and members of consecrated life

In African local churches special attention is given to formation of priests and religious. The vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life are gifts of God to the church. They are very dear to the life and mission of the church. They answer to important needs of the church in order to promote her overall apostolate or mission. These vocations are given by God to individuals in the church and through the church (LG, 44). It would not be correct to say that vocations flourish in Africa because the continent is poor. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that vocations become a greater and more difficult challenge where material well-being is prevalent (*Vita Consecrata*, 64). In many dioceses in Africa one can reckon a large number of seminarians in philosophy and theology and in novitiates of different religious institutes or congregations. These are situations in which those African local churches found themselves. Some of them have already embarked upon the construction of a diocesan major seminary to decongest the existing provincial seminaries. An African bishop describes the situation of his diocese in the following ways:

Our concern in this Province reached its crisis point at the beginning of the academic year 1996/97 when it became obvious that our students who had qualified from the Spiritual Year Formation Centers had not all been accommodated in our one Provincial Seminary ... We had to go about begging for vacancies at the neighboring Provincial Seminaries.... Apart from a few vacancies granted us.... There was no further solution to our problem of accommodation.... As a responsible Pastor of souls, I thought we can no longer sit down and look on helplessly. It is from this situation of things that I began to think earnestly of the need for a Major Seminary in our Archdiocese which has the greatest number of major seminarians not only among the Dioceses of Nigeria but also among those of Africa and the entire Catholic world.

The above citation is an attempt to explain the position of some African bishops with regard to vocations and their sincere suggestions for a possible solution to the problems with regard to the acceptance of candidates for the priesthood and their authentic formation. It is a simple testimony that vocations to the priesthood can never be too many since vocations are for the universal church. It is also an adequate response to the skeptical remarks of those who question the genuineness of African vocations. Moreover, when one considers the painstaking discernment carried out in the African local churches in the selection and training of candidates, and also their encouraging perseverance rate, the rationalization that vocations flourish in Africa because it is a poverty stricken area of the world, seems inadequate. Vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life are promoted primarily by Christians living model lives in following Christ. The church promotes vocations "through her prayer and sacramental life, by her proclamation of the Word and by education in the faith, by her example and witness of charity" (*Pastores dabo Vobis*, 38). Therefore, by promoting vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life, the African local churches are making an important contribution to the mission of the church in the continent and beyond.

Building the relationships in mixed African communities

Another area where the African local churches have started to give particular attention is the question of forging relationships between Africans of different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds sharing one

community or nation. There is a pressing concern for the local churches to help in the strengthening and deepening the relationships among Africans of different ethnic groups living in the same Christian community or parish and nation, and between them and people of other religions living in the same society. It is disturbing that Africans of diverse ethnic groups can not stay together in one parish church or organization without rancor and suspicion of one another. In Africa, exaggerated ethnocentrism has continued to frustrate the on-going work of evangelization and church formation in the continent. This situation affects both ecclesial and civil communities in Africa. The missionary image of the church as family addresses the problem of exaggerated ethnicity which is often one of the sources of difficulties in the actualization of ecclesial communion in the African local churches and in achieving a real nationhood in many independent African states. As John Paul II writes:

It has been rightly noted that, within the borders left behind by colonial powers, the co-existence of ethnic groups with different traditions, languages, and even religions often meets obstacles arising from serious mutual hostility. Tribal oppositions at times endanger if not peace, at least the pursuit of the common good of the society. They create difficulties for the life of the churches and the acceptance of pastors from other ethnic groups. This is why the church in Africa feels challenged by the specific responsibility of healing these divisions.

Therefore, one of the privileged areas of concern in missionary efforts in Africa today is about building the relationship in Christian communities in various local churches. It is creating Christian communities that are pluralistic, non-discriminating, loving and welcoming. In this way African local churches would become models for deepening the relationship in a mixed environment. The fact is that till now local churches in Africa (despite the creation of National Episcopal Conferences), are fundamentally ethnic based. Though ethnic manifestations have positive aspects like promoting common cultural elements for the inculturation of the gospel within the particular group and in helping the people to retain their identity in a multi-ethnic nation. But the problem arises when people of different ethnic groups that make up the nation-state begin to migrate to other parts of the country and interact among themselves and with the others in various areas of human endeavors. Furthermore, wherever the people go, they also move along with their religion. So much so that Christians from different cultural, ethnic groups are beginning to form a kind of "international" community in different parts of their country. This is the reality of migration. In such a situation what should characterize the nature of the Christian community.

At the 1994 symposium of Nigerian Indigenous Priests Association (NIPA) held at Owerri, the Onitsha Archdiocesan participants in their paper offered a definition of a local church in an African context. They defined a local church in terms of community other than geographical location. According to them, a local church-community should be defined concretely as "... an integrated church community in a particular locus whether it be a town, a station, a community, a parish or even a diocese where the members by themselves interact in order to provide for all they need for the life and the work of the church community in the particular locus of our reference". This means in essence that where a group of Christians in a definable church community, within a definable locus, work together to provide all that they need for life, work and progress of their particular community, such a community would qualify as a local church and all its members as local church community members. Here the emphasis is more on community than geographical location. A local church community therefore, does not mean the same thing as "indigeniety" with the geographical location of that community, but rather with the integrity of the church community situated in a particular locus.

An example of such a local church community will be where a group of Lebanese Catholics live together and set up a church station in a village in Mbaise (Nigeria). They set up a basic church community in that place, which they contribute to build up from their resources, their church community would, in this regard, qualify as a local church community in that particular geographical location under the the diocesan bishop of Mbaise. Care is to be taken that it be not understood that the said church community is exclusive to only Lebanese. A second illustration would be where the Christians from different parts of the world or of a particular country gather as a community and from their efforts, and resources corporately strive to build up a church community in a particular place. The community so built up qualifies as a local church community in that place. Another example would be, where Christians, who are living in their own geographical native place together with Christians from other places of origin but residing in that same place and integrating with the indigenes of that geographical location, build up a church community from their corporate resources together with the indigenes of that geographical location. They form one local church community even if those of the other non-indigenous members might be lending support or help to the church formations located back in their places of origin of their ancestors.

Conclusion

Therefore, missionary activity in Africa today is challenged to encourage authentic formation of agents of evangelization and church formations that have common goal of assisting African Christians towards overcoming the menace of exaggerated ethnicity. Building a self-reliant church in Africa also rests principally, on liberating the people from the incident of primitive ethnicity that disturbs them in their various situations in different African nations. To be true disciples of Christ, African Christians have to over-grow exaggerated ethnicity. It is only in this way that they can creditably launch out to the task of evangelization of their people and others. Thus, as Pope John Paul II said, in the African context, the new evangelization will aim at building up the church-as-family, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between ethnic groups, favoring solidarity and sharing of personnel and resources among the particular churches, without undue ethnic considerations (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa* 63).

Ref.: Text from the Author for SEDOS.