

Introduction

IN 1956, A GROUP OF priests from Africa and the Caribbean studying in France published a book, *Des Prêtres Noirs S'Interrogent (Black Priests Question Themselves)*, in which they raised important questions and made suggestions on how the Christian faith could address the African agenda and be at home with African culture. This work is often regarded by many as the beginning of systematic theology in the Catholic Church in Africa. While many will argue that systematic theology has been going on in Africa going back to the first hundred years of the Christian faith (see for instance, Thomas C. Oden's work, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*), one cannot ignore the pioneering work of these priests. They offered in this collection of essays some strong arguments that African cultural values possess a character of their own, and offered a valid basis for constructing vigorous Christian communities in Africa.

These ancestors of ours saw the continent in trouble and became, as Adrian Hastings commented, the “young Turks” with a new manifesto for African renaissance. At the time of their writing this book, most of the churches in Africa were run by expatriates; the “*prêtres noirs*” thus felt that the problems of the churches of Africa would be better handled when the indigenous clergy and religious took over from their Western compatriots. The “*prêtres noirs*” had argued that the “White” missionaries were westernizing the African churches without sensitivity to cultural pluralism and local social context. They were convinced that the rediscovery of the agency of the Africans in the Christian mission would re-image and re-contextualize the content, form, and goals of theology and impact significantly on the directions of the churches in Africa.

Introduction

We do not know what the judgment of the “*prêtres noirs*” would be if they saw the situation of the churches in Africa and the condition of African Christians and Africans in general under Africans’ watch. These brave priests were like the brave nationalists of the 1950s who fought for independence for African countries, firm in the belief that Africans are best suited to lead Africa. The judgment on how Africans have led Africa in both political and Christian institutions is part of the conversation we introduce in this work.

Every generation of Christians must reach into their cultural and historical conditions, inner resources, and the inexhaustible gift of the Christian faith, in order to discover for themselves what the Spirit is saying for the re-creation of the human spirit of that generation. Every generation must be accountable to the Lord and to the men and women of their times, as well as the generations to come, about what fruits and gifts they have brought through the Christian faith and into the Christian faith (*Chaque generation puissante recevoir sa propre impulsion et sa kinesis de creation*—Chinua Achebe).

In his preface to the 50th anniversary revised and updated edition of this pioneering work, Leonard Santedi Kinkupu pointed out that it was significant because it called African theologians and Christians to a more historically minded interpretation of the Christian movement. It was a work that was contextual in the sense that it showed that the locus of divine revelation was the social context of the people and that an analysis of culture must be an essential part of African theology. It was, above all, a work that was relevant to the people because it addressed the African condition and invited Africans—especially priests, religious, and Christian leaders—to a more critical self-understanding in the light of the condition of African Christians. Thus, this work set an agenda for African theology that continues to evolve even in our times. However, it was an agenda that was expected not to be dominated by the dogmatic debates, denominational battles, and questions about the structure of power and authority in the Church that have exhausted the inner creativity of many Western churches.

The 50th anniversary celebration of the publication of this book and the emergence of Catholic theology in Africa was held at the Catholic University of West Africa (French Abidjan) in 2007. It was the consensus of the African theological community at that gathering that the task of African theologians now is how to use the vibrant Christian imagination

of African Christian consciousness to create a new African ecclesiology that will bring abundant life to our suffering people. What are the new paths that are opened to African churches today for helping to realize the design of God's kingdom for the people of Africa? How does the mission of the Church in Africa reflect God's dream for Africa? How can the Church be an oasis of hope in a continent long adrift from the global radar of development but remembered more for her persistent crises than for her inner riches and strength?

The search for abundant life, for peaceful and prosperous societies, has been at the center of African life and religious and social organizations as well as political and communal networks. Prior to the advent of Christianity and Western intervention in Africa, various African peoples have ordered their societies through a catena of religious frameworks. This was because a religious imagination was the *norma normata* of a truly African worldview. What today is called African Traditional religions permeated the life and meaning-making structure of African peoples. African Tradition as such had a common similarity with the Christian faith in terms of the goal of religion (abundant life) despite many differences in creed, legal code, ritual processes, and cultic norms and practices. If Christianity positively impacted European civilization, it makes sense to ask how it is impacting African civilization in our challenging times.

Aware of the pluralistic nature both of Christianity and of African societies and the place of the Church as the center for the articulation, celebration, and transmission of the Christian message, the contributors in the volume ask these fundamental questions: How is the Christian message to be communicated so as to enable African Christians to bear witness to the Good News in every aspect of their lives? What is the face of Jesus in African Christianity? Are there some influences on African christological symbols based on the Hellenistic construct upon which Western Christianity was spread in Africa? How can we evaluate the mission of the Church in Africa among African Christians who enthusiastically embrace and celebrate their Christian faith? In other words, what positive imprint does Christianity leave on the lives and societies of African Christians? Is their moral life any better or different from that of their non-Christian African brothers and sisters with whom they live and work in their societies? Are they the salt and light Jesus Christ envisions Christians to be? Does the Christian message have the potential of

Introduction

affecting African civilization positively, as it once did in Europe and other continents that have embraced Christianity?

The authors of this volume are driven by an evangelical passion and love for Africa, the Church, the gospel, and the Christian movement. We wish to follow in the glorious footsteps of our ancestors, the “*prêtres noirs*” in making some proposals on the path that is opened to the Church in Africa in the search for abundant life, love, peace, solidarity, communion, and a sense of shared destiny.

The contributors to this volume are all at the cutting edge of theological formulation in their diverse studies. Like the “*prêtres noirs*,” most of them are studying or have studied in North America or Europe, and are working in or involved at different levels of church life and academic commitment in Africa, North America, and Europe. All the contributors to this volume were born after the decolonization of Africa and the beginning of the indigenization of African churches in the Roman Catholic tradition. Most of them were evangelized by local priests and religious, unlike the “*prêtres noirs*,” who were all evangelized by Western missionaries. All the contributors to this volume share a common desire for a new kind of church in Africa, and a common hope that the resurgence of the Christian faith in Africa represents a third wave for global Christianity that carries immense hope for the achievement of abundant life for Africans.

This work is significant in many ways. In the first place, it is not only descriptive and explanatory; it is rooted on strong quantitative and qualitative approaches needed for a critical study of African history. The authors have direct access to the data of the Faith at the grassroots, reified in our own experience of the Faith in action (or inaction) and our studies of African history in general and African Christian history and doctrine in particular. In addition, the essays are grounded in biblical theology, admitting multiple frames of reference and integrating diverse hermeneutical keys in order to proceed systematically in engaging the data of the Faith both from the point of view of historical and dogmatic analyses, analysis of African Christian experience, and African condition in general, and the perspective of wider concerns of global Christianity.

The essays are designed to be prophetic and personal, concerned more with proposing concrete theological and realistic pastoral recommendations for the Church in Africa than in simply enunciating dogmatic and doctrinal truths or validating theological positions through

proof-texting from magisterial or dogmatic documents. As young African clerics and religious, we are troubled about the state of the Church in Africa and the conditions of our African brothers and sisters. We are also concerned about the future of the Christian faith in Africa. We pray for and wish to work with our lay brothers and sisters, as equal partners and co-disciples of the Lord, in the search for how to improve the practice of the Christian faith through an assessment of its practice.

Theologically, we envision this work as a contribution to the long-standing debate on the meaning, content, and goal of African ecclesiology. It is also our own modest answer to the question raised by Pope Paul VI at the end of the Second Vatican Council: “Church, who do you say that you are?” This work is also inspired by the theme of the Second Synod on the Church in Africa, which defines the identity of the Church in Africa as salt and light. The Church can become an instrument for bringing about reconciliation, justice, and peace to the African continent by showing in her identity, ecclesial life and mission that she is the source, and agency for abundant life for God’s people in this beautiful continent. Abundant life is understood here as the flourishing of the human and cultural life of Africans which leads to human fulfillment and the actualization of the gifts of God to the land and peoples of Africa. It is also conceived as the realization of the temporal and ultimate purpose of life for all people in this continent, and the promotion of sustainable life for nature and the environment as well. The transformative theological praxis for realizing this goal is presented in these essays using tools of critical history, biblical and theological analysis as well as socio-cultural engagement with African social context in its beauty and ambiguities. These essays are concerned with theologically articulating a better future for Africa through a critical engagement with the African social context, the life and witnessing of the Church in Africa, and through an appeal to the resurgent and buoyant spiritual momentum within African Christianity.

The Church in Africa faces serious challenges that reflect Africa’s troubling social context. These challenges we project in these essays are unique to Africa and require a unique approach. The self-identity of the Church in Africa—our way of “being Church” in Africa—must give a Christian response to meeting these challenges and will have strong implications for theological, liturgical, canonical, and pastoral practices in African Christianity.

Introduction

In chapter 1, Stan Chu Ilo, develops an African theology of abundant life through a thoroughgoing exegetical and biblical Christology, using the Gospels of John and Mark. African theologies, he argues, should be based on a sound biblical theology, a critical understanding of Christian history and doctrines, a cultural hermeneutics of the christological symbols employed in the theologies of Christ in African Christianity, and a hermeneutical phenomenological immersion in African social and religious contexts. The credibility of the churches in Africa, he argues, depends on who the churches say, by their inner life and external acts, that Christ is.

In other words, how does the glory of Christ shine forth in the life of the Church? How does Christ illumine the structures and pastoral practices of the Church, and how have the gospel values become the concrete norm for the life of the churches and the lives of African Christians? In a concrete sense, how have the gospel values and the life of Christ shaped the lives of the Christians and the societies in which they inhabit, and how does this reality empower African Christians to work with other members of their communities in building a better society where the abundant life is available to everyone?

In chapter 2, Emeka Xris Obiezu attempts a response to the most frequent question the Church in Africa struggles with each time it is confronted with the reality of the enormous sufferings beleaguering the African continent: *What must we do?* This work takes for granted that the type of compassion that responds effectively to African situations must transcend the traditional understanding of mere individual instance and private charity to include socioeconomic and politico-moral concerns and actions. It thus seeks on one hand to explore the ways the Church can demonstrate its commitment to this new dimensions of compassion, an opportunity it finds in the ongoing discussion on African development. On the other hand, it seeks, within the context of *Ecclesia in Africa*, a hermeneutical tool for such participation. It identifies this tool in the metaphor of “family of God’s people,” used by the document to describe the Church in Africa.

Hence, the whole work is committed to demonstrating through critical analysis, how this metaphor, “Church as the family of God,” can, instead of detracting, enrich, reconstruct, and contribute to a new way of relating that consciously and deliberately leads to a civilization that will be at the service of true community. One important question explored

here is: How does the concept of “Church as the family of God’s people” serve the liberative, ethical, and compassionate principles—solidarity, autonomy, relationality—in a non-exclusive manner?

Joseph Ogbonnaya examines how the Christian faith is lived out concretely, in the daily lives of the people, in chapter 3. The Church can only be the salt and light of African societies by how she shapes the minds and morals of African Christians, imbuing them with a sense of hope and transformative grace. This informs a people’s understanding of the true and the false, their judgment of right and wrong, as well as their deliberations, decisions, and subsequent actions in accordance with the dictates of the gospel. As people of God baptized in Christ, African Christians as members of the Church, the clergy, and the laity, find meaning and purpose amidst the changes and chances of life because of the Christian faith which they have embraced. This chapter is an appraisal of what the Church is for Africans as they weave together the variables of their lives.

This chapter addresses two questions: (1) Do African Christians see the Church as relevant to them; that is, does the Church make any meaningful difference in improving their human condition? (2) What areas of her life should the Church in Africa improve to serve as salt and light for Africans? By making use of available statistics, this chapter assesses the African Church as salt and as light and makes recommendations on the way forward. Specific attention is paid to the African Church’s response to the socioeconomic and cultural challenges facing Africa in a globalized world.

In chapter 4, Alex Ojacor analyzes the African situation, beginning with the threats that the continent is facing. In spite of all those threats, he argues, Africa is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities. These are human values that can contribute to an effective reversal of the continent’s dramatic situation and facilitate revival. This is what the second part of the chapter deals with. There are signs of revival, and there seems to be hope in the horizon. Africans, he emphasizes, are a people of hope. African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life. Indeed, community life in African societies expresses the extended family. If Africa preserves this priceless cultural heritage and resists the temptation of individualism—which is alien to her best traditions—then, there is cause for hope for an African renaissance, with the Church in the forefront of both cultural and spiritual revival needed for a new Africa.

Introduction

In chapter 5, Ebere Amakwe takes up the challenges of the information age in Africa, especially its impacts on African women. As the wave of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) continues to blow stronger, women of all classes, ethnicities, and nationalities are encountering the monumental changes produced by its global impact. Studies on the societal effect of ICT have shown that the ICTs have winners and losers, beneficial consequences, and harmful applications: issues that have been raised are the digital divide, inequality in access, and sexual exploitation (fruits of the former). This article maintains that these problems need to be solved, especially as they affect African women. To do this, the following points are important:

- (a) girls and women must be educated to cultivate interest in the study, use, and pursuit of careers in ICT
- (b) the needs and dignity of African women must be globalized through ICT
- (c) women need to become part of the ICT system
- (d) regulation policy must be developed on the part of governments and states.

In chapter 6, Bekeh Ukelina Utietang takes up the question of the challenge of evangelization for the Church in Africa. While the Church in Africa is growing tremendously, it is his position in this essay that this growth is not sustainable unless the Church in Africa develops a solid ministry of evangelization that takes into account the cultural heritage of Africa and the culture of love taught by Jesus Christ. This essay looks at the weaknesses of the current work of evangelization in Africa and proposes four concrete ways in which the Church can become the salt and light in Africa.

The conclusion summarizes three fundamental challenges facing the African Churches today: accountability, identity/autonomy, and religious freedom/inter-religious dialogue; the ramifications of these challenges; and why and how the Churches in Africa should respond to these challenges.

These essays are intended to stimulate discussion on the state of the Church in Africa and the future of the Christian movement in Africa. Many other issues that could not be covered in this volume because of

space limitations, we intend to take up in the future. Questions about formation of priests, religious, and lay pastoral agents; the specific nature and direction of Catholic charities and Catholic schools; the problem of lack of accountability in our churches; the relationship between the local churches in Africa and the universal Church; collegiality; the state of the religious communities in Africa, especially indigenous religious orders; polygamy; subordination of women; celibacy; widowhood practices; and childless marriages, among others.

This work is also limited by the fact that all the writers belong to the Roman Catholic Church and, naturally, draw from their experience from that tradition. However, most of the challenges facing the Catholic Church in Africa also face African Christians in other denominations. Indeed, ecumenical dialogue is urgently needed in African Christianity, in that African Christians realize that the historical and cultural issues that led to the doctrinal and denominational divides in the Western churches do not speak to the serious needs and pathos of contemporary African Christians.

So, clearly, in this book, we have not said the last word. This is only an invitation to African Christians to a deeper and far-reaching conversation on how the Church in Africa can better serve God's kingdom, as salt and light, and offer abundant life to our people.

—Stan Chu Ilo and Joseph O. Ogbonnaya