

AN OVERVIEW OF 50 YEARS OF VATICAN II AND THE CHURCH IN Africa

BY

Laurenti Magesa

Hekima College Jesuit School of Theology, *Nairobi Kenya*

Introduction: Pope John XXIII and Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was, without any doubt, the immediate brainchild of one individual, Pope John XXIII. The Council was born of Pope John's profound spiritual vision about God, the Church, humanity and the world. Pope John intuited that the relationship between the Church and the world should be essentially mutually benevolent and supportive, not antagonistic and hostile. The divine kingdom was for him intimately associated with the plenitude of life in and of the world. Although the church is not *of* the world, it seemed to be his profound conviction, it is *in* the world; it is in the world that God, through the Holy Spirit, continually accomplishes the divine design of recreating and renewing everything anew in Christ.

Pope John described his decision to convoke the council in terms of “a spontaneous inspiration.” Perhaps that was the reason why, as the analyst of the Council, Fr. John W. O'Malley, puts it, “The announcement took everybody else by surprise, including the other cardinals of the Curia.” It certainly astonished the bishops and the Catholic faithful of the world. “After the definitions of papal primacy and infallibility at Vatican Council I, some theologians predicted that there would never be another council because it seemed to them that now the pope would solve all the problems” (O'Malley 2008, 17-18). Again, this perception was widespread. For the majority of Catholics in Europe and the Americas, the Councils of Trent (1545-1563) and Vatican I (1869-1870) were generally presented as councils to end all councils. The faithful in the rest of the Catholic world, and certainly in Africa, did not know much about these councils, nor cared about them. Few even had an indigenous word for “ecumenical council.” For them, the pope, mediated by the local bishop, was the extent of their ecclesiology and faith. Of course, there was no such thing as yet as conferences of bishops.

The reading and interpretation of the Scriptures were hitherto, therefore, restricted to the priests and hierarchy in the church. Since the upheavals of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, there had grown a strong suspicion in the Catholic Church against reading, let alone studying the Scriptures by the general faithful. But Martin Luther had translated the Bible into German and published it in 1534. The Bible in the vernacular had consequently become more accessible to the common people in the Protestant tradition as they could read it for themselves for spiritual inspiration and nourishment without the intervention of priests. After this initiative, more translations in other European vernaculars, namely, French, Dutch and English, soon followed, and they had the same effect. However, the Catholic Church was not to accommodate itself to this change until four centuries later. It was not before 1943 with Pope Pius XII's encyclical letter, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, that a spirit of openness towards reading and a critical study of the Bible slowly began to emerge in Catholic Christianity.

Significance of Pope John's Encyclicals

Pope John and Vatican II, therefore, changed the inward-looking spirit that had prevailed in the Church since the Council of Trent which had set upon itself the task of countering the radical effects of the Protestant Reformation upon the structure and some of the beliefs of the Church. But even before Vatican II began, Pope John seemed to have sensed the need for this change. Deeply immersed in, and guided by, a holistic and positive vision of the world and all existence, he wrote the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* in 1961, describing the role of the Church in and for the world as inherently maternal. The letter was situated against the background of the anxieties among the faithful ushered in society earlier by modernity, an intellectual movement that, in the eyes of some at the time, seemed to erode the certainties the Church had had since the late Middle Ages. With modernity, more and more individuals were coming up with theories implicitly or explicitly questioning some of the assumptions the Church thought were sacrosanct and unassailable. As a consequence, the Congregation of the Index (1571-1917), later called the Holy Office (1917-1966) had been established to prevent these “errors” from spreading. One way the Congregation did so was to periodically compile and publish an “Index of Forbidden Books.” In its 1948 edition, the Index contained almost 4,000 titles. These included works in science, theology, morality, philosophy, and so on. In his spirit of openness to the world, Pope John saw no serious reason for these anxieties, as if anything coming “from the world” was evil. It was as a result of Vatican II, that Pope Paul VI abolished the Index and reconstituted the Holy Office into the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1966.

In 1963, mid-way through the Council’s deliberations, and barely three months before his death, Pope John issued another encyclical on peace in the world, called *Pacem in Terris*. The encyclical was written in an environment of great tension, when the world was being torn apart by the destabilizing conflict of the Cold War then raging between the ideological blocs of East and West. But *Pacem in Terris* had a more immediate background, the situation in October 1962 where nuclear confrontation had not only been possible but had nearly occurred with the Cuban missile crisis. In spite of this, Pope John thought it still possible and necessary for the Church to be hopeful about the future of humankind and the world. The pessimism that some harbored, that the only direction the world was headed to was a downward spiral of violence and destruction, did not constitute any part of Pope John’s spirituality.

The point these two letters carried and demonstrated was one of positive engagement between the Church and God's creation, whatever the circumstances. This was the spirit with which they influenced in a profound, if perhaps inconspicuous, way the orientation of Vatican II’s deliberations. Both were commemorative documents, belonging to and pushing forward the tradition of the social thought of the Church, initiated in modern times by Pope Leo XIII's letter, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and Pope Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). However, Pope John’s encyclicals had a different quality and flavor. They combined into one three prongs that constitute the Christian reality: deep trust in God, immense love for humanity, and unlimited openness to the goodness of world. It was not an accident that these documents addressed themselves not only to the Catholic, or even the Christian, communities. The pope deliberately intended them to speak to all people “of good will” throughout the world. In short, *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris* were completely devoid of suspicion or fear of the world but were, on the contrary, full of trust and hope. According the pope's own reported position: “I do not fear the habits, the politics, or the religion of any man anywhere in the world as long as he lives with an awe of God” (see Fellows 1979, v). This is what his encyclicals demonstrated.

A question that must perhaps remain hypothetical, because of the fact that there is no way to answer it with certainty, is whether without Pope John's initiative with these letters and his convocation of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI would have written his encyclical masterpiece on Catholic social thought, *Populorum Progressio* (1967) on the meaning of human development. The same question applies to Pope John Paul II with reference to his encyclicals *Laborem Exercens* on human labor (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) on human development, and *Centessimus Annus* (1991) on the contemporary political and economic situation. Further, would Pope Benedict XVI written his *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), on the idea of the economy for the common good? It seems that the style, breadth and scope that all of these latter documents demonstrate are steeped in Pope John's letters and the spirit and events of Vatican II that he set in motion. It is, therefore, not far-fetched to speculate that without them, Pope John Paul II might not have undertaken his many pastoral travels throughout the world, including Africa, or that Pope Benedict XVI after him would not have visited Benin to promulgate the Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, concerning the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, popularly known simply as the Second African Synod. Indeed, would there have been an African Synod, or any synod, at all for that matter?

The need to have a more visible presence of the world's episcopate in the teaching and government of the Church beyond the Roman curia had been long felt worldwide since Vatican I. Pope John had been aware of this feeling in convoking the Council. Shortly after his election in 1963, his successor, Pope Paul VI, immediately broached the idea of the reform of the curia at the beginning of the second session of the Council and formally established the office of the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution in September 1965. This was also in response to the conciliar desire for collegial oversight of the Church as well as a concrete expression of the Council's understanding of the Church as "the People of God" (LG, 9-17). There were, however, some strictures to this institution that were unsatisfactory to many. Rather than being an organ of the practice of collegiality of the bishops with the pope as the Council had envisioned, the synods turned out to be an organ of the papacy, "an instrument of the primate to use as he wished," as the then theologian Joseph Ratzinger complained (Ratzinger 1966, 140).

Nevertheless, since the end of the Council, the ecclesiology of the Church as People of God and the structure of collegiality included in the institution of the Synod of Bishops have been somewhat reflected in the ordinary processes of the synods. These hang on two ancient principles in the history of the Church: first, the principle of listening and, second, the principle of reception. In terms of the synods, the first principle underlines the importance of the participation of the entire Church in their preparation, in line with the ancient principle of listening to the voice of the people as inspiration from God. The second emphasizes the necessity of the positive reception of teaching on the faith, according to the equally ancient theological rule that teaching becomes "an effective guide for the believing community" only when it is effectively accepted by the community in question (Coriden, Undated).

The Council and the African Church: Two Approaches

For the 50 years since the council ended, what concerns us directly in this assessment is whether, on account of Vatican II and the events it set in motion, the Church in Africa has any reason to celebrate. Celebration is in the final analysis an occasion of rejoicing because something positive has taken place in one's life on account of the agency of a person or thing or event. We understand celebration in theological language as a moment of grace, when we

recognize that God, through the Holy Spirit, has involved us in some divine creative activity in the world for the purpose of our own growth towards salvation. At the same time, through the power of the same Spirit, we acknowledge our own grace-filled participation in the particular moment of grace.

As far as Vatican II is concerned, the issue involved in determining the situation of the Church in Africa – whether or not to rejoice – may be approached in two complementary directions. From one angle, we might ask whether the African Church through its bishop representatives present at the Council contributed anything distinctive to the Council deliberations during its four sessions, from 1962 to 1965. If so what? In other words, was the sense of the faith of the African continent adequately presented? What, indeed, was that view? Given the sources available about the proceedings of the Council, this aspect of the question is relatively easy to answer. The other aspect, however, the issue about the way or ways the teaching of the Council in its sixteen documents has influenced and shaped the different dimensions of life in the African Church and continent in general during the last 50 years is much more complex. Taking into account the time period that has elapsed, as well as the size and the many and often dramatic happenings in the continent, this aspect can be approached only in a rather general and tentative way.

Both considerations, however, open the door to appreciate the relationship between the Council and the African Church from a number of focal points. The most relevant of these include the social-historical and theological interactions between the two realities. Looking at these dimensions, it becomes possible to evaluate realistically two levels of the Council-Church process: first, as we have indicated, the African Church's role in the Council as an *event*, and, secondly, the impact and challenge that the Council as a *process* has had on the African Church in the intervening half-century or so. Although each of these levels is a distinct entry into the discussion, in the end both can only be discussed fruitfully in conjunction with each other. For if, on account of historical circumstances, the contribution of the African Church to the council-event was definitely limited, the challenge and impact of the Council on the continent during the intervening fifty may be found to be significant, giving reason for celebration.

The Council-Event: New Directions

First, though, a look at Vatican II itself as an assembly or event. Of all the ecumenical councils of the Catholic Church, Vatican II has been described as standing in a category of its own. In terms of planning, size, and the breadth of issues covered it is unparalleled in history. The positive mood that contextualized it, inspired by that of Pope John himself, has already been alluded to. Whereas previous councils had been mostly concerned with defining dogma and condemning heresies, the general character of Vatican II is that it was a pastoral council, interested in guiding the Catholic faithful on how to live their faith in the world and among other people. Accordingly, the issues discussed were extensive, covering many human concerns and dimensions. The Council tread novel ground in many respects. It was concerned about the church's opening doors or windows to the world, as Pope John wished, not about closing them. Thus, in addition to the rather explicitly unprecedented issues discussed about ecumenism, the missionary activity of the church and, above all, religious freedom and the Church's relationship to non-Christian religions, there was the document *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. The Constitution is generally regarded as the Magna Charta of the Council that set all the other council documents into the context of

openness and appreciation of divine grace working in the world.

Unlike any previous Council, Vatican II's preparation was long and elaborate, taking the better part of four years and involving, for the first time ever for an ecumenical council, wide consultation. The preparatory commissions to draw up pre-council documents did extensive work. Father Joseph Ratzinger (then university professor but since 2005 Pope Benedict XVI) who was present at the council as theological expert to Cardinal Josef Frings, reports that the commissions produced 70 working plans, "enough to fill 2,000 pages." He notes that "This was more than double the quantity of texts produced by all previous councils put together" (Ratzinger 1966, 5).

Furthermore, the number of participants was huge, covering all parts of the Catholic world. O'Malley, notes that although the number of people actually present at the assemblies in St. Peter's Basilica varied throughout its four sessions (considering sicknesses, deaths, and other factors), "generally there were about 2,400 council fathers participating at any given time" (O'Malley 2008, 21; Ratzinger 1966, 6). Compare this with 750 fathers at Vatican I and Trent's approximately 200 voting participants at its peak, and the difference between these councils and Vatican II in this respect becomes very clear.

Thirdly, if there were from the beginning attempts to control the Council by a few cardinals from the curia, they did not succeed. The conciliar bishops rejected many of the *schemas* or documents prepared by curial officials for endorsement and commissioned new ones. This was unprecedented. Another Council historian, Norman Tanner, notes that "Before the council the Roman curia had been allowed to prepare draft documents, but these quickly proved unacceptable to the council, so new decrees had to be hammered out almost from scratch" (Tanner 2001, 98). Ultimately, the assembly took its own previously uncharted course. It can truly be said that a palpable sense of freedom of spirit pervaded the discussions. No single group of bishops was able to manipulate the agenda or the discussions on the floor. This constituted another uniqueness of Vatican II, perhaps the most important one of all. Just as internal manipulation was nipped in the bud, so to speak, there were similarly no significant power plays from external civil sources. This was quite unlike many of the previous councils where the hand of political authorities was often obvious.

The sense of freedom during the Council proceedings allowed for the introduction into the agenda and discussion aspects of current theological developments that would otherwise have not surfaced at all if liberty to speak had been muzzled. On this point Ratzinger wrote:

Previously it had seemed that Roman officialdom was the only really formative and active authority in the Church, and that apart from the curia there was really nothing but non-authoritative outsiders. Now it became clear that, besides the official curia organs (subordinated to the pope), the body of bishops was a reality in its own right, infusing into the dialogue and the very life of the Church its own spiritual experience (Ratzinger 1966, 9).

Of course, the liberty experienced at Vatican II was not sudden; it had a long history, championed by many of the theologians who attended the Council as advisers to the bishops. Ratzinger notes that this desire for freedom was something that had been percolating within the church and was now coming into the open. Many of the theologians spearheading the change in their writings had been previously censured in one way or another.

Fourthly, quite apart from the universal representation at the Council which helped to get the Council's message to more parts of the world than before during recesses when the cardinals went home, there was the role that the media of mass communication played during the entire Council process. At the beginning, the curia was rather hostile against the presence of the press and no significant details of the Council discussions emerged publicly. But slowly this changed and some aspects of the Council were broadcast by the electronic and print media to the world. This event that was Vatican II was, therefore, followed not exclusively by Catholics but by many others who cared to know. It is important to recall also that there were at the Council observers from other Church groups, Protestant and Orthodox, who must have reported their impressions to their member churches.

Role of the African Church in the Council-Event

The question that must be asked concerning the relationship of the African Church and Vatican II is this: Did the church in Africa have any significant input in the conciliar event? Do the conciliar deliberations reflect much contribution specific to the church in Africa? Is this evident in the sixteen official documents that emerged from the council? Are there sentiments there that touch directly the concerns and needs of the Church in the continent at the time? Probably the most important social-political issue in Africa at that time was the struggle for political independence. Did the bishops from Africa articulate this aspiration of the African peoples so that it is reflected in the deliberations and some of the Council documents? Looking at the theological and pastoral territory the Council-event covered, one had to answer these questions largely in the negative.

The needs and concerns of the European churches appear clearly in the documents. In fact some analysts have said that despite its universal reach that we have noted in terms of the geographical representation of the bishops, the theology and the pastoral concerns of Vatican II were fundamentally European. The council was basically a European council. "Europe, its concerns and the legacy of its history, provided the framework within which Vatican II operated," writes O'Malley. "The story of the council is almost exclusively the story of Europeans fighting over issues arising out of European history" (O'Malley 2008, 13). By and large, even at Vatican II, the conviction famously phrased by Hillaire Belloc that "the faith is Europe, and Europe is the faith" was still, even if unconsciously, very much alive among practically all of the Council Fathers (Allen 2009, 14). At any rate, such was the theology of the universal Church, where the center of the Church since Trent and Vatican I was literally Rome, in particular, and Europe in general.

Statistics tell part of the story and lend credence to this assertion. There were about 300 bishops from Africa (only 10 percent) as compared to more than a thousand from Europe (36 percent). Nine hundred bishops came from the Americas (34 percent) and the remaining 20 percent from Asia and Oceania (see Sullivan 2002, 21). But more important than numbers were the ideas presented and influence exerted in the council floor discussions. These formed the substance of the official documents. A list of "Council Participants Frequently Mentioned" includes only one bishop from Africa, Marcel Lefebvre, archbishop of Dakar, Senegal, a member of the missionary order of the Holy Ghost Fathers, and only because of his arch-conservative positions (for list, see O'Malley 2008, 321-328; see also Tanner 2001, 111). Although bishops from Africa did not lack organization among themselves, there were factors that did not allow much original, that is genuinely African, contribution from them.

To appreciate this situation, one has to keep in mind the facts of history which are rather widely known. But in order to contextualize and highlight the situation, they deserve quick mention. At the time of the Council the African continent was only slowly emerging from a very long period of colonial rule, but structurally and economically it was still firmly tied to and dependent on Europe. It would be so for a long time even after independence. The same situation existed in the Church. The Church in Africa in the 1960s was in every way an extension of the European Church, so that the relationship between them was vertical rather than horizontal. There was the Mother Church of Europe and the Daughter Church of Africa. Europe dictated the terms of the Church's existence in Africa and Africa had little to say about it. Thus, although the population of Catholics in Africa was already sizable, other crucial factors that would have genuinely constituted the identity of the Church in the continent as a distinctive "African church" were sorely missing. The Church in Africa lacked not only the face but also a distinctive content, which led to its presence at the Council to become basically an augment of Europe. This situation was inevitable.

Additionally, the vast majority of the Council fathers from Africa were European missionaries, trained in European philosophy and theology, and basically carrying identical attitudes about the African people and the Church in Africa that their counterparts from the global North held. They were convinced, for example, that the authenticity of the Church in Africa consisted in faithfully mirroring the theology and structures of the European Church and theology. The episcopate from Africa, once again, therefore, generally gravitated towards and reflected European positions. Specifically, these bishops generally reiterated positions taken by their counterparts from their countries of origin and their religious congregations. The organizer of the episcopate from Africa at the Council was Joseph Blomjous of Mwanza in Tanganyika, a Dutchman and member of the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers). On account of insufficient theological and pastoral immersion into the African spiritual and cultural realities, issues of immense consequence to the African faithful were treated perfunctorily, or not at all.

One example is the issue of polygamy which, even the forward-looking Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World lumped together in one sentence with "the plague of divorce" and "so-called free love," and described it as "disfigurements" of the nobility of marriage and the family (see GS, no. 47). One truly wonders whether the bishops from Africa would have concurred with this formulation if they had cared to argue out the case of this issue on its own merits from the African experience. The institution of polygamy as practiced traditionally in African societies does have its shortcomings, of course, but these do not include "the plague of divorce" and "free love." On the contrary, it radically excludes them and insists on love and fidelity, some of the most important and cherished values of marriage.

Also, the Decree on Priestly Formation (*Optatam Totius*), though granting that formation programs should be the responsibility of individual churches, still put forward as the ideal the study of Latin (no. 13) and "speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas" (no. 16). Having no clear alternative in this respect, and not wanting their clergy to appear "inferior" or "second-class" if trained under a different, but more adapted system of formation, the majority of the conciliar bishops from Africa were unable to see the flexibility afforded them in this decree for the training of their clergy.

Lastly, the validity of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam as forms of a genuine search for the divine was acknowledged by name in the Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-

Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate* nos. 2-3). African or other indigenous religions were not, except in the rather reluctant admission that there is also a spark of the divine among peoples whose cultures are not “advanced,” in distinction from “religions bound up with cultural advancement” (see no. 2):

From ancient times down to the present, there has existed ... a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life; at times, indeed, recognition can be found of a Supreme Divinity and of a Supreme Father too. Such a perception and such a recognition instill the lives of these peoples with a profound religious sense (no. 2).

At the time, in 1965 when this document was promulgated, African Religion could not even be given the dignity of the title as a religious orientation. Again this was a fact reflecting Western perspectives on African world-views, which were generally negative towards the latter. The reluctance of African Christians to completely abandon some of their indigenous religious practices was interpreted as lack of conversion, not as a shortcoming in the evangelization methods and processes. Judging by the situation in the Catholic Church today, this is still the case in many areas. Some documents which have come out long after the Council make one wonder whether the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humane*) also contemplated the liberty of the followers of African Religion to worship God as their spirituality directs them.

Assessing the Council as a whole, Tanner is therefore correct when he writes that

Reception of the council's decrees has ... been generally less engaged outside the western world than inside it. Christians of Latin American [sic], Asia, and Africa, central and eastern Europe, have not felt the same affinity with the council. Their interests and concerns were not addressed so directly: for example, oppression and structural injustice, for which the western world bears much responsibility, popular religion of a non-western kind, and so on. Nevertheless this distance should not be exaggerated. Even if these churches outside Europe subsequently pursued paths of their own, the new directions may well have become possible only because of the changes initiated by the council (Tanner 2001, 110-112).

Evidence from developments in the Church in the past 50 years in Africa demonstrates that Vatican II is perhaps more justifiably celebrated for what it subsequently offered to the Church in the continent in terms of theological and practical insights and possibilities. During this time, the Church has made strides from being merely a Church in Africa (as was the case before the Council), to some degree identifying more closely and realistically with the continent. What this means is that the Council's teaching has indirectly inspired the African Church to begin the process of becoming a “local,” and not just a “particular” Church.

Reasons for Cautious Celebration

Need for a local Church

Perhaps the most important inspiration of Vatican II as far as Africa is concerned has been the need to construct an African local Church or African local churches. The Council used the term “particular churches” because many in the Council, following curial conviction, argued that in

the diocese structure we already have local churches. But this is not how the idea has been understood and developed in Africa.

The term “particular church” is seen in Africa a juridical-structural term; it usually identifies the Church with the diocese. The term “local Church,” however, is favored in Africa because it is seen as going beyond that geographical and juridical circumspection by taking in theological-pastoral implications. It emphasizes the necessity of culture and inculturation in preaching, liturgy, and accepts the reality of the faith at any level: continental, regional, diocesan, parochial, small Christian community, and even family levels (see Komonchak 1987, 77-90). In the understanding of local Church, the focus of evangelization is “to make the Gospel truly enter into the cultures of the people so that the church is no longer looked at and treated as a mere foreign accretion,” as Bishop Francisco F. Claver from the Philippines writes. In Africa the Church could not be credible if it continued to present itself “fully clad in Western garments, speaking in a foreign tongue, and, hardest of all, seemingly disdaining to assume a native face” (Claver 2008, 13-14). As has been the case throughout history, a particular Church, while remaining in the union of faith with other churches, must forge an identity as a local Church, one that is necessary to bring about the horizontal level of relationship with other particular and local churches. Only in this way can genuine dialogue and mutual sharing for growth in maturity be possible.

There is no serious reason to doubt that the number of Catholics in Africa would have continued to increase phenomenally even without Vatican II. Although harboring often unarticulated reservations concerning the Catholic Church's approach to evangelization in several respects, African people saw in the message of the Gospel the Church carried something beautiful and readily acceptable to them. This was especially so as the Gospel was made concrete in the social services the church provided in the form of education and health care facilities. There is reason to believe, however, that without Vatican II, the Church in Africa would not have taken the initial steps towards becoming local. It can be credited to the Council that almost just a decade afterward, at the 1974 Synod on evangelization, The Church in Africa had solidified the idea of having its own identity. “Africa was concerned with becoming an autonomous church, led by native clergy and not treated as an immature ward of the old churches of Europe” (Claver 2008, 14). The call for a “moratorium” on foreign personnel and finances had been broached by the Protestant churches in the continent. Its echo, although muted in Catholic circles, was not totally absent there (see Claver 2008, 14).

Leadership

The need for a Church with a local face in Africa was recognized immediately after the Council, helped by developments in the political sphere. As we have mentioned, Vatican II coincided with the period when many African countries were gaining independence from their colonial masters and taking the first steps to becoming fully fledged nations. At the same time, however, many dioceses were under the leadership of foreign bishops, even though the number of native clergy in many of them was growing impressively. This discrepancy appeared to many an odd situation, leading at least one political leader to wonder loudly why, “if we can govern ourselves politically, we cannot do so in the Church”? The unease did not go unnoticed by the missionary leadership itself in Africa as well as, obviously, by Rome. Native ordinaries were rapidly installed in various dioceses, so that within a short time the structural face of the Church dramatically changed.

These developments flowed from ideas broached in various conciliar documents, especially

Gaudium et Spes, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church, and *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Freedom. The Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius*, was particularly instrumental in insisting on the promotion of priestly vocations and establishing houses of formation. From being a Church which was hardly self-ministering at the time of the Council, the African Church grew to send out men and women as missionaries to minister to the churches of the global North. One might mention as well that a number of Missionary Institutes founded in the global North have grown to depend on vocations from the global South, including Africa, for their vitality.

Small Christian Communities (SCCs)

Thanks to Vatican II, a dimension of major structural and pastoral significance in parts of the Church in Africa, which is now playing a major role in making the Church truly local, is the reality of Small Christian Communities (SCCs). As Joseph G. Healey, a well-known researcher the ecclesiology of SCCs in Africa, writes:

Small Christian Communities ... developed as a result of putting the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) into practice. Latin America, Africa and Asia (especially the Philippines) all pioneered the development of a SCC Model of Church or a BCC Model of Church. After considerable research and debate, many specialists feel that quite independently of one another these three areas of the Catholic Church in the Global South *simultaneously* experienced the extraordinary growth of SCCs. Thus the African experience did not come from Latin America but developed on its own ... (Healey, 2012).

A key moment in their historical development came in 1973 in Nairobi, Kenya, at a study conference of the regional Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) on "Planning for the Church in Eastern Africa in the 1980s." There the bishops resolved on "building church life and work on Basic Christian Communities in both rural and urban areas." They explained that "Church life must be based on the communities in which everyday life and work take place: those basic and manageable social groups whose members can experience real inter-personal relationships and feel a sense of communal belonging, both in living and working" (Healey 2012).

Theological evolution

There has also been a remarkable theological development in Africa after the Council. Already in the mid-1940s, the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels had published his pioneering, largely positive, and influential study on African systems of thought titled *La philosophie bantoue* (1945, English translation 1959 as *Bantu Philosophy*). This publication marked a daring leap of intellect and courage, given the mood of the times about Africa. In the 1950s a few African and Haitian priests, in a collection of essays published as *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (1956) had also expressed their dissatisfaction with European theology applied indiscriminately to African faith realities. And in Kinshasa in January 1960, Tharcisse Tshibangu and Alfred Vanneste had debated the merits and demerits of developing an African theology. These must be considered the seeds for the birth of African Theology. The consolidation of this genre of doing theology in Africa must be attributed to the spirit of openness of the Council to the world, Special credit goes again to *Gaudium et Spes*, but especially to *Dignitatis Humane* and *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions.

The latter declaration, it is true, distinguishes between “religions bound up with cultural advancement” and supposedly others less so. That is why, as we have pointed out, African Religion is not referred to by name. However, the famous statement the declaration makes in paragraph 2 was soon understood by students of African culture to include also African Religion. If, according to the document, the Church must reject “nothing which is true and holy” in any culture, she must not do so in African Religion. On the contrary, she should look “with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which ... often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 2). From this small seed, an African theology, seriously affirming this statement in terms of African culture and religion, has flourished also in various schools of higher learning.

The Synods on Africa

As a result of a number of factors, including the numerical growth of the Church in Africa, its political instability, and the orientation of African theology, within the space of a decade and a half the office of the Synod of Bishops in Rome has called two special assemblies on Africa, one in 1994 and the other in 2009. This is no small achievement for the African Church. The themes discussed in both synods were extremely relevant, having to do with evangelization, reconciliation and justice and peace. Although questions remain as to the influence of these synods on the African Church, their symbolic value cannot be underestimated.

One dissatisfaction involves the way the questions in the preparatory documents (the *Lineamenta*), were structured. If they were intended to involve all the People of God into the process, they failed to do so. Secondly, the language of the post-synodal exhortations also does not seem to render itself to ready understanding, nor does it touch the deep concerns of the general faithful. The most critical question regarding these synods, however, concerns follow-up methods. What is being done to implement their major conclusions? Since, in the main, the synods take up and advance themes the Vatican II touched upon in its historical and theological contexts in the 1960s, if the synods were truly implemented, they would advance considerably the teaching of the Council in Africa.

Prospects: Progress or Regression?

Why caution?

For any celebration, Africans usually go all the way to make the event memorable. Celebration is for them always a spiritual occasion where all the forces of existence, the visible as well as the invisible, concentrate in and cooperate with nature to move life forward in expectation of better and greater things to come. This is how it should be when the African Church is celebrating the golden anniversary of Vatican II. But looking at the concrete scene, it is both necessary and important to be realistic. One must not do a disservice to the Church by painting an unrealistic picture of theoretical expectations.

Integral healing

The desire for the healing ministry in African spirituality is well known, but in the Catholic Church not much is being done about it. As Michael Katola put it, many African Catholic

Christians “seek deliverance, healing, and exorcism from other denominations because [Catholic] priests do not realize they have redemptive powers” (Allen 2009, 36). However, it might be an exaggeration to assert that African priests “do not realize” that by their ordination they are tasked with this responsibility; it is the theology so far in force in the African seminaries, a result of European rationalism, enforced rigorously in diocesan policies, that considers the intrusion of spiritual forces into human life as “irrational” and “superstition.” There are numerous examples in many an African diocese where a priest or a catechist has been disciplined for attempting exorcism. The most famous case is, of course, that of the then archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia, Emmanuel Milingo. Fortunately, he is one of a few who has exhaustively recorded his experience in that area.

Since the beginning of evangelization witchcraft, for example, has been dismissed as a nonsensical belief. However, for numerous Africans, whether Catholic or not, “Witchcraft is a reality,” affirms Katola, and if we dismiss it, “we cannot deal with it.” John L. Allen notes that a document from a possible future African pope presenting Christ as Victor over the forces of evil, over spells, and witchcraft “would arguably stand a better chance of finding an audience as the global Catholic grassroots [particularly in Africa] than virtually any other subject that Western theological elites might desire a future pope to address” (Allen 2009, 37).

The Laity in the Church

The conciliar Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, brought the reality of the laity and their vocation through Baptism forcefully to the center of the experience of the Church. There can be no Church without the laity. Through Baptism the laity are members of the Body of Christ, charged as much as anybody else with the ministry of bringing the Gospel and holiness, which is Christ’s kingdom, to society. Especially in these fast changing times, the role of the laity is indispensable and could be realized in practice through the structure of Small Christian Communities (SCCs).

Although the development of acceptance of SCCs in many African dioceses has been a welcome ecclesiological development, it would not be correct to say that their ecclesiology has been fully thought out, or even that in every diocese they are accorded the status that some of the official documents of the Church accords to them. Can they, in their present state in many dioceses, be described as a truly “new way of being church,” incorporating within them and expressing many of the characteristics of the early, apostolic communities in terms of organization, the celebration of the Eucharist, and the growth of focused ministries? There is still a long way to go to realize the Church as truly “a community of believers” through SCCs. What the Australian bishop, John Heaps, has written captures some important elements of what as yet still needs to be done to realize the deep theological and pastoral implications of SCCs:

To make this truly the Church, the bishop would approve these communities, accept their leaders and ordain their priests. All this would be done in consultation with the community. Leaders would emerge, candidates for ordination and the non-ordained ministries would present themselves for acceptance by the community and ordination or induction by the bishop. Some would need to undertake further studies, many of which would be part-time in the same way that many people undertake part-time studies.

Members of the communities which make up the diocese would be very much involved in the consultation process leading up to the choice of their bishop (Heaps 1998, 105-106).

Ecumenical and interreligious relations

Though not much mentioned in African Catholic circles, one of the most scandalous aspects of Christianity in Africa – indeed, the Council itself recognized it as “a stumbling block to the world (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no, 1) – is the division and divisiveness in Christianity, which in the past often amounted to rancor. This division does not have its origin in Africa; it was introduced here as part and parcel of the Christian “faith” throughout the experience of evangelization in the continent. Africans in general fail to comprehend why, if all Christian churches preach the same Jesus Christ, there should be so much malice among them. Yet so far, ecumenical initiatives, even on the level of practical ecumenism, are few and far between. Of course, ecumenical initiatives in the West have mostly been based on doctrinal understanding, something of little interest to the average African Catholic or Christian. Exceptionally baffling, given their religious and spiritual culture of hospitality and sharing, is the exclusion that Catholic doctrine insists on with respect to Eucharistic sharing in times of joy and celebration.

The African Initiated Churches, though much more fractured than the mainline denominations as a result of the circumstances of the origin of each, seem not to be as acerbic against one another as the mainline Christian churches. They also possess God-given values that are a useful and valid expression of faith in Christ. The Council counts “Promoting the restoration of unity among all Christians [as] one of [its] chief concerns” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, no 1). Nevertheless, if there is one area where the Council has failed to inspire any meaningful movement in African Catholicism, it is in this area. As well, although African Theology is trying to make dialogue between Christianity and African religion a reality in the Church, sadly little reflection has appeared concerning dialogue between Christianity and Islam in Africa.

Conclusion: The Hermeneutical Circle/Spiral Again and Again

According to Walter Kasper, the impact of the Council depends on nothing other than “the people who translate its words into terms of real life.” Thus, “What is at issue for Catholic theology,” Kasper argues, “is not the council in itself. What is in question is the interpretation and reception of the council” (Kasper 1989: 168). According to Kasper, the conversation about the Council in the following years should be about this, and this alone.

The partners in this conversation in Africa are twofold: the tradition of the Church as received from the missionary Church on the one hand, and the great tradition of African Religion and spirituality on the other. This conversation is carried on by three indispensable mediators: namely, the Christian experience of the African laity, interpreted by the African theologians and examined and confirmed or disputed by the hierarchy. There will always be a healthy tension here, one that must not be eliminated but creatively fostered on all sides. This is the same tension that made Vatican II itself possible. It is a similar one that should constitute the process of Christian hermeneutics of doctrine and its development.

The African Church has already a certain experience and overall view of the Council during these past 50 years. This experience must be brought to bear, or “applied” ever anew, to particular questions that face the faith every day. This dynamic will help to give further understanding of the spirit and spirituality Council. “This back-and forth process of questioning from whole to part and back again, from general to particular and back again to general

knowledge, is the rhythm of the hermeneutical circle or spiral.” As Ormond Rush explains, this “is not a vicious circle; I don’t just return to the same point in the circle. When I come back and take the helicopter view of the landscape, I understand it differently than before” (Rush 2004, xi). At every moment of the application of the spirit of the Council in the African local Church, it will bring with it different and greater divine gifts than before.

Laurenti Magesa
Hekima College
P.O. Box 21215
00505 Nairobi

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Although the church is not of the world, it seemed to be his profound conviction, it is in the world; it is in the world that God, through the Holy Spirit, continually accomplishes the divine design of recreating and renewing everything anew in Christ.Â

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