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The Roman Catholic church in Africa (25)

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(25) THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AFRICA

Lawrence Iwuamadi and Raoul Baziomo

Introduction

The history of Catholicism in Africa is complex, owing to two major factors. First, Catholicism in Africa can be traced back to the beginnings of Christianity. Therefore one is faced with almost 2000 years of history. Second, this long period of time does not come across in a linear manner and so requires great care to avoid missing salient points and at the same time to resist the temptation of making ambiguous claims. The primary focus of this work is to highlight the stages of development and growth of Catholicism in Africa.¹

In order to be comprehensive, this work presents Catholicism in Africa starting from the Biblical time and early Church, through the period of Christianity in North Africa before and under the Arabs, to the beginning of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century missionary strides of the Portuguese. The last part will focus on the current situation of the Catholic Church in Africa.²

Biblical Origins of the History of Catholicism in Africa

The basis of the Catholic claims of biblical origins of its history in Africa may also be true for other early Christian traditions on the continent, like the Copts and the Ethiopians. The presence of the Infant Jesus and the Holy Family of Nazareth in Africa (cf. Matt. 2:13-15) forms the point of departure of any Christian history on the continent. The second important New Testament reference to Christianity in Africa would be the conversion and baptism of the first non-Jewish Christian, the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).³

Early Catholicism in Africa

Africa played a significant role both in early Christianity and early Catholicism. Though Christianity generally flourished in North Africa, the region could be divided into North Eastern and North Western African Christianity. The North Eastern African Christianity was predominantly under Greek Alexandria, while the North Western Christianity was under the Latin Rome. The North Eastern part would consist of the Copts in Egypt which were spread through the banks of the Nile to Ethiopia. These churches will become part of what is designated as Oriental Orthodox Christianity after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451).

North Western African Christianity, with allegiance to the Pope in Rome, covered the area known today as the Maghreb, and played a significant role in the life of the early Catholic Church. The important centres

¹ It is not feasible within the number of pages assigned to this work to offer a detailed history of Catholicism in Africa. There are a number of history books on Christianity in North Africa and on the evangelization of sub-Saharan Africa. The focus of this work is to highlight the various stages of the development and growth of Catholicism in Africa and to present the current overview of the Catholic Church.

² Most of the data used in this part are based on the *Pontificio Annuario 2014*, Città Del Vaticano, Editrice Vaticana, 2014. The “*Pontificio Annuario*” is the annual official statistic publication of the Catholic Church. The 2014 edition is updated to the 31 December 2012.

³ This is contrary to the view that Cornelius was the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity because the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8) precedes that of Cornelius (Acts 10).

of this region included Carthage (present-day Tunisia), Hippo or Hippo Regius (present-day Annaba in Algeria), Numidia (present-day Algeria and a small part of Tunisia) and Mauretania (the ancient first-century region which consisted of the present-day northern part of Morocco and Algeria). These centres produced great Catholic theologians like Tertullian (c. AD 160-225) who is reckoned to be the founder of western theology,⁴ and who wrote extensively on varied theological themes including the Trinity, the Eucharist, Baptism, Apostolicity, among other subjects.

Another eminent theologian of Carthage was St Cyprian. Beyond his theological contributions, he oversaw at least three important councils and synods as the Metropolitan of Carthage. The third council of Carthage defined the books that constitute the canon of the Bible on 28th August 397. Cyprian wrote extensively and his works include those on the unity of the Church (*De Unitate Ecclesiae*) and his treatise on baptism.

St Augustine of Hippo, the great philosopher theologian whose teaching will be a guiding line of Catholic doctrines, is regarded as the greatest Latin theologian of all time. Augustine's teachings touched on almost every aspect of Catholic theology including Trinity, Ecclesiology, Creation, Christian Anthropology, Mariology, Freewill, Original Sin, Grace. He wrote extensively against heresies, such as Arianism, Pelagianism, Manicheanism, Donatism. He wrote commentaries of some books of the Bible, and among his most popular works are *The Confessions* and *The City of God*.

As well as the great theologians of this era, early African Catholicism produced at least three popes: Pope Victor (c. 189-199), a Berber and the first pope whose surviving encyclicals are all in Latin; Pope Miltiades (311-314) under whose pontificate Constantine gave the Pope the Lateran palace and signed the Edict of Milan (313), and he presided over the Lateran Synod, which condemned the Donatist heresy; and Pope Gelasius (492-496). This same period produced a number of African saints and saints with links to Africa who are revered in the universal Church. These include Saints Perpetua and Felicity, St Monica, St Augustine, St Cyprian, St Zeno, the Bishop of Verona who comes from Africa.⁵

Catholicism in Africa: From Arab Conquest to the Middle Ages

It is known that while North Eastern African Christianity (Coptic and the Ethiopian Churches) resisted and survived Arab conquests, the Latin western part was decimated. However, it is an overstatement to suggest that Catholicism was totally wiped out from the continent. Historians have indicated the apparent presence of Catholicism up to the twelfth, fourteenth and even eighteenth centuries in South Tunisia.⁶ According to Virginie Prevost, Catholicism continued to exist in certain small quarters of this region. There were two letters of Pope Leo IX of 1053, which clearly indicated that there were at least five bishops, two of whom are those of Carthage and Mahdiyya/Gummi. Also, in 1076, Pope Gregory VII pointed to the existence of at least two bishops in Africa.⁷

⁴ Justo L. Gonzáles, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Volume 1, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, 91-93.

⁵ There are no less than 973 saints coming from Africa or whose lives are closely linked with Africa. See Catholic Online, "Black/African Saints", www.catholic.org/saints/black.php.

⁶ Virginie Prevost, "Les dernières communautés chrétiennes autochtones d'Afrique du Nord." *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 4 (2007): 477.

⁷ Prevost, "Les dernières communautés chrétiennes", 472. "Dans deux lettres datées de 1053, le pape Léon IX déplore, en pleine crise arabe, l'affaiblissement considérable de l'Église d'Afrique; il n'y subsiste que cinq évêques et les deux principaux, celui de Carthage et celui de Mahdiyya/Gummi, se disputent l'archevêché. Les trois autres diocèses évoqués par le pape sont sujets à discussion; il pourrait peut-être s'agir de Gabès ou de Gafsa. En 1076, le pape Grégoire VII regrette que l'on ne trouve plus en Afrique les trois évêques nécessaires à l'ordination d'un nouvel évêque: il ne reste plus que celui de Carthage et celui de Bougie, récemment nommé à la demande du souverain hammâdide al-Nâsir pour sa nouvelle capitale."

It is thought that some of the reasons for the collapse of Catholicism at that point were the inability of North African Catholicism to take into adequate consideration the culture of the people and to make use of local languages in liturgy and Bible translations, the persecution of the Vandals, the effects of Donatism and the Arab invasion.⁸ It would take missionaries following the colonial merchants through the Atlantic Ocean to bring the Catholic faith into the other parts of Africa in the fourteenth century.

Catholicism in the Sub-Saharan Africa

The formal commitment towards implanting Catholicism in sub-Saharan Africa may be traced to about 1493 when Pope Alexander VI 'divided the world, assigning the West to Spain and the East, including Africa, to Portugal'.⁹ The drive for colonization in search of gold and for the spiritual crusade of winning souls for Christ brought Portuguese merchants and missionaries into different parts of the coastal lands of Africa. However, earlier contact had already been established in the areas of Cape Verde (1445) 'where Fr Polono de Lagos celebrated the first Mass in West Africa'¹⁰ and the Gambia region around 1458,¹¹ from where the spread continued along the western coasts to Wolof of Senegambia, Guinea, Saõ Tomé, Warri, Benin, the Gold Coast, etc. And a bishopric see was erected in Cape Verde in 1553. At the same time the Portuguese missionaries took Catholicism to Zaïre. The contacts, which took place around 1483, led to the conversion of prominent kings that paved the way to massive acceptance of the Catholic faith.¹² In 1597, Sao Salvador was raised to a bishopric see. The faith in the latter half of the sixteenth century reached other areas like Luanda and in the east to Mozambique, which St Francis Xavier visited on his way to Asia. Catholicism was brought to Madagascar at about the same time. Though South Africa had early contact with Catholicism, the faith was proscribed by Dutch and British rules until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

However, these early missionary drives did not survive much into the nineteenth century. This was as a result of the problems arising from the Portuguese domination of the mission fields on account of its *Patroado* (patronage) privileges granted by the Popes.¹³ They insisted on their prerogative in Africa when indeed they were unable to handle the increasing demands of evangelization on the continent.

In 1622, Pope Gregory XV created the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith – *de Propaganda Fide* – to direct mission churches. This congregation, now known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, co-ordinated a number of religious orders in the mid-nineteenth century to resume a more organized missionary thrust in Africa. This phase of evangelization saw an impressive growth of the number of Catholics and a rise among Africans that accepted the vocation to the priesthood. The presence of African-born missionaries energized the spread of Catholicism on the continent. If the nineteenth century was about the beginning of a committed acceptance of Catholicism in Africa, the twentieth century saw it flourishing. There has been a consistent increase in the number of African Catholics, African religious, priests and bishops, as well as the number of ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Africa.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins (2008) 227-230.

⁹ Bengt Sundkler – Christopher Steed, *A History of The Church in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), 44.

¹⁰ Joseph Kenny, O.P., *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa, 1445-1850*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press (1983), 1.

¹¹ Kenny, *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa*, 45.

¹² Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom, The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York: Oxford Press (2002) 29-30, 47-51.

¹³ The *Patroado* mission implied that mission was the task of the civil government: The King exercised the patronage over the church and the missions in early Portugues mission.

Catholicism in Africa in the 21st Century

According to the *Annuario Pontificio 2014*, Catholics in Africa make up 18.63% of the total African population. While Catholics in Africa were less than 1% of the global Catholic population in 1910, in 2012 they constituted 16% of Catholics in the world numbering over 198 million, with a 4.92 million increase between 2011 and 2012 alone.

The Catholic Church in Africa is organised according to the traditional Catholic structures of parishes within dioceses, metropolitan sees (archdioceses) with suffragan dioceses, and provincial and national episcopal conferences. According to the *Agenzia Fides* of the *Pontificie Opere Missionarie*, Africa had, on 8th October 2014, 91 Metropolitan Sees and 387 Dioceses that make a total of 478. There were 22 Apostolic Vicariates, two Apostolic Prefectures, one Mission *Sui Iuris*, and three Military Ordinariates that are under the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: *de Propaganda Fide*. Outside these, there were about fifteen churches directly subject to the Holy See.¹⁴ Africa had, on 31st December 2012, 534 Ecclesiastical Circumscriptions, 528 Mission Stations with resident priest, and 73,936 Mission Stations without resident priest.¹⁵

Clergy and Lay Apostolates

Africa has through history produced 42 cardinals coming from: Benin (1); Burkina Faso (2); Cameroon (1); Cape Verde (1); Democratic Republic of the Congo (3); Egypt (3); Ethiopia (2); Ghana (2); Guinea (1); Côte d'Ivoire (3); Kenya (2); Madagascar (3); Mauritius (1); Mozambique (2); Nigeria (4); Republic of the Congo (1); Senegal (2); South Africa (2); Sudan (1); Tanzania (2); Uganda (2); Zambia (1). Two African cardinals are members of the Roman Curia: Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, and Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson of Ghana, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. On 13th April 2013, Pope Francis named Cardinal Monsengwo Pasinya Laurent of the Congo (DRC) as a member of the *Council of Cardinals* whose task is to assist the Pope in the governance of the Universal Church and to reform the Roman Curia.¹⁶ Two other African Cardinals who served in the Roman Curia were Cardinal Francis Arinze of Nigeria and late Cardinal Bernadin Gantin of Benin. With the creation of new Cardinals on February 14, 2015, Africa has 21 living Cardinals, 16 of whom are Cardinal electors.

As of 31st December 2012, Africa had a total number of 700 Bishops (506 diocesan bishops and 194 religious bishops), and of these 91 were archbishops of the metropolitan sees.¹⁷ A steady increase in the number of vocations to the priesthood, to the religious life and a greater involvement of the faithful in lay apostolates have become a remarkable aspect of Catholicism in Africa. The tables below show the details:¹⁸

African Population – Catholics

Population	Catholics	Percentage
1,066,140,000	198,587,000	18.63% (=)

¹⁴ *Pontificio Annuario 2014*, 1099-1105.

¹⁵ *Pontificio Annuario 2014*, 1099-1105.

¹⁶ Vatican, "Chirograph by which a Council Of Cardinals is Established to Assist the Holy Father in the Governance of the Universal Church and to Study Possible Revisions of the Apostolic Constitution "Pastor Bonus" on the Roman Curia", http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130928_chirografo-consiglio-cardinali.html.

¹⁷ Agenzia Fides, "Catholic Church Statistics", October 19, 2014. www.africamission-mafr.org/STATISTICHE_2014_eng.pdf.

¹⁸ Agenzia Fides, "Catholic Church Statistics", October 19, 2014. www.africamission-mafr.org/STATISTICHE_2014_eng.pdf.

Bishops

Total Bishops	Diocesan Bishops	Religious Bishops
700	506	194

Priests

Total Priests	Diocesan priests	Religious priests
40,133	27,493	12,640

Persons/Catholics per Priest

Persons per priest	Catholics per priest
26,565	4,948

Permanent Deacons

Total Permanent deacons	Diocesan Permanent deacons	Religious Permanent deacons
419	387	32

Brothers and Women Religious

Brothers	Women Religious
8,645	68,590

Members of Secular Institutes

Members of secular institutes: Male	Members of secular institutes: Female
77	851

Lay Missionaries and Catechists

Lay missionaries	Catechists
7,195	393,580

Major Seminarians – Diocesan and Religious

Total Major Seminarians	Diocesan Major seminarians	Religious Major seminarians
27,728	18,713	9,015

Minor Seminarians – Diocesan and Religious

Total Minor seminarians	Diocesan Minor seminarians	Religious Minor seminarians
53,085	47,295	5,790

Schools, Hospitals, Charity Works and Welfare

The Catholic Church in Africa drew from the spirit of the early missionaries the strength of engaging actively in temporal, spiritual and social works that are geared towards the development of the human person and society. Organized around the diocesan structures and under the supervision of the local ordinaries, the Catholic Church in Africa has been engaging in education, health care and other forms of charity work. The official church statistics of 2014 show that there were about 14,711 Catholic Infant Schools with 1,444,069 pupils in Africa. There were also 36,613 Catholic primary schools with over 16 million pupils and 12,060 Catholic secondary schools with about five million pupils. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of Catholic institutions of higher learning and universities.

The Catholic commitment to health care and concern for those who are defenceless is evident in the number of hospitals, dispensaries, homes for the elderly, etc., that have continued to provide for those in special need. The table below gives the numbers:

Hospitals	Dispensaries	Leprosy centres	Homes for the elderly, chronically ill, disabled	Orphanages	Nursery schools	Marriage Counselling centres	Other institutes
1,298	5,256	229	632	1,398	2,099	1,728	2,556

Eastern Catholic Churches in Africa

The Catholic Church in Africa is largely of the Latin Rite Catholics, but there is also a significant presence of the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite commonly known as the Eastern Catholic Churches. The Eastern Catholic Churches have ‘institutions, liturgical rites, ecclesiastical traditions and the established standards of the Christian life’¹⁹ similar to the Eastern and Oriental Churches, but they are in full communion with the Pope. There are about 22 Eastern Catholic Churches who together with the Latin rite Catholics make up the Catholic Church. In Africa, however, those with relevant presence are the Armenian Catholic Church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Coptic Catholic Church, the Maronite Catholics, the Melkite Greek Catholics and the Syrian Catholic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia. There are also the Ethiopian and the Eritrean Catholic Churches. On January 13, 2014, the Holy Father Pope Francis erected a new Apostolic Exarchate for the Maronite Catholic Church of the Antiochian Tradition in West and Central Africa in Nigeria.²⁰

Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa and African Catholicism

The spirit of Catholicism in Africa is reflected in the two Special Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops for Africa. The solemn opening of the first Special Assembly on the theme *THE CHURCH IN AFRICA AND HER EVANGELIZING MISSION TOWARDS THE YEAR 2000: ‘You will be my witnesses’ (Acts 1:8)* was celebrated in St Peter’s Basilica on 10th April 1994. The fruit of this Synod was the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, issued by Saint Pope John Paul II. The Second Special Assembly of the Synod for Africa convoked by Pope Benedict XVI took place, 4th-25th October 2009, with the theme *THE CHURCH IN AFRICA IN SERVICE TO RECONCILIATION, JUSTICE AND PEACE, ‘You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world’ (Matt.5:13-14)*.

These two Synods highlighted the specific elements of Catholicism in Africa, as well as the challenges facing the church.

Lay Apostolates and Spirituality

The Synods for Africa called for greater participation and involvement of the lay Catholic faithful in the life of the Church. Catholicism in Africa is marked by the existence of many and different Sodalities and Pious Prayers groups including those devoted to Jesus, Mary and the Saints, such as *the Confraternity of the Most Blessed Sacrament; the Sacred Heart of Jesus; the Legion of Mary; Guild of St Anthony of Padua; St Theresa of the Child Jesus; St Vincent de Paul; Blessed Iwene Tansi Sodality*, etc. Others are dedicated

¹⁹ Vatican II, “*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite”, *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, ed., Northport: Costello Publishing Company (1998), no 3.

²⁰ *Pontificio Annuario 2014*, 1099-1105.

to particular spiritualities, such as *the Catholic Bible Society* and *the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement*.

There are also a number of clergy and lay faithful engaged in other movements; organizations and institutions in the Catholic Church, such as the *Focolare Movement*; *the St Egidio*; *the Communion and Liberation*; *the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei*, etc. Regular and active participation in one or more of these constitute an integral part of Catholicism in Africa.

The Bible and the Biblical Apostolate

The Sacred Scriptures play a significant role in Catholicism in Africa. The Bible has been translated into several local languages to encourage active participation in liturgy and grassroot evangelization.²¹ With the growing number of African Catholic biblical scholars and priests who are well prepared from the seminaries, Bible studies are encouraged in families and in small Christian communities.

Church Structures and Organization: National, Regional and Continental

On the local level, a number dioceses are grouped together under a metropolitan Archbishopric See to form the Bishops' Conference of an Ecclesiastical Province. Different Provincial Bishops' Conferences of a particular nation come together to form a National Episcopal Conference while national episcopal conferences of a particular region would form Regional Episcopal Conferences.

The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM)

The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) is the body that gathers the different national and regional episcopal conferences of Africa and Madagascar, and aims at preserving and fostering communion, collaboration and joint action among all the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and the Islands. According to its mission, the Symposium through the Episcopal Conferences promotes: (i) Propagation of Faith, (ii) Human Development, (iii) Ecumenism, (iv) Formation, (v) Consultation.²²

The Episcopal Conferences that constitute the SECAM are:

English-Speaking:

1. ETHIOPIA AND ERITREA: The Assembly of The Catholic Bishops' Conference Of Ethiopia And Eritrea (ACBEE)
2. GHANA: Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC)
3. KENYA: Kenya Episcopal Conference (KEC)
4. LESOTHO: Lesotho Catholic Bishops' Conference (LCBC)
5. LIBERIA: Catholic Bishops' Conference of Liberia (CABICOL)
6. MALAWI: The Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM)
7. NAMIBIA: Namibian Catholic Bishops' Conference (NCBC)
8. NIGERIA: Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN)
9. SOUTHERN AFRICA (BOTSWANA, SWAZILAND, SOUTH AFRICA): Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC)
10. SUDAN: Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference (SCBC)

²¹ II Special Assembly for Africa, *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*. "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world" (Mt 5: 13, 14), Instrumentum Laboris, Vatican: Vatican Press (2009), no. 19.

²² SECAM, "SECAM Mission", www.secam-sceam.org/mission.html.

11. TANZANIA: Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC)
12. THE GAMBIA, SIERRA LEONE: Inter-Territorial Catholic Bishops' Conference of The Gambia And Sierra Leone (ITCABIC)
13. ZAMBIA: Zambia Episcopal Conference (ZEC)
14. ZIMBABWE: Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC)

French-Speaking:

1. EGYPT: Assemblée de la Hiérarchie Catholique d'Egypte (AHCE)
2. BENIN: Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Benin
3. BURKINA NIGER: Conférence Episcopale du Burkina/Niger
4. BURUNDI: Conférences des Evêques catholiques du Burundi
5. CAMEROUN: Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Cameroun
6. CEDOI: (OCEAN INDIEN-COMORES, MAURITIUS, SEYCHELLES)
7. CERNA: Conférence Episcopale Régionale du Nord de l'Afrique
8. CONGO BRAZZAVILLE: Conférence Episcopale du Congo Brazzaville
9. COTE D'IVOIRE: Conférence Episcopale Nationale de la Côte d'Ivoire
10. GABON: Conférence Episcopale du Gabon
11. GUINEE CONAKRY: Conférence Episcopale de la Guinée
12. GUINEE EQUATORIALE: Conférence Episcopale de la Guinée Équatoriale
13. MADAGASCAR: Conférence Episcopale de Madagascar
14. MALI: Conférence Episcopale du Mali
15. REPUBLIQUE CENTRAFRICAINE: Conférence Episcopale Centrafricaine (CECA)
16. REPUBLIQUE DEMOCRATIQUE DU CONGO: Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO)
17. RWANDA: Conférence des Evêques catholiques du Rwanda (C. Ep. R)
18. SENEGAL/MAURITANIA/CAP-VERT/GUINEE BISSAU: Conférence des Evêques du Sénégal, de la Mauritanie, du Cap-Vert et de la Guinée Bissau
19. TCHAD: Conférence Episcopale du Tchad (CET)
20. TOGO: Conférence Episcopale du Togo (CET)

Portuguese-Speaking:

1. ANGOLA E SAO TOME E PRINCIPE: Conferencia Episcopal De Angola e Saõ Tomé (CEAST)
2. MOZAMBIQUE: Conferencia Episcopal De Moçambique (CEM)

Regional Episcopal Conferences:

1. ACEAC: Association des Conférences Episcopales de l'Afrique Centrale
2. ACERAC: Association des Conférences Episcopales de la Région de l'Afrique Centrale
3. AHCE: Assemblée de la Hiérarchie Catholique d'Egypte
4. AMECEA: Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa
5. CEDOI: Conférence Episcopale de Madagascar et de l'Océan Indien
6. CERNA: Conférence Episcopale Régionale du Nord de l'Afrique
7. IMBISA: Inter-Regional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa
8. RECOWA-CERAO: Regional Episcopal Conferences of West Africa

Relationship with Other Christians

The commitment to ecumenism is an important aspect of the Catholic Church in Africa. However, the intensity of the ecumenical experience and collaboration differs from country to country and from region to region. In some countries, Catholics are members of the National Christian Councils or Associations. In most parts of the continent Catholics and other Christians together celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. On other occasions, translating the Bible into local languages with the United Bible Societies has fostered dialogue among Christians of all confessions in Africa.²³

Relationship with African Traditional Religions

The Catholic Church in Africa approaches the followers of African Traditional Religion with an open-mind to study this religion and enter into truthful dialogue with the culture. The intention is to seek out the good elements 'which Christianity can adopt, while purifying those judged incompatible with the gospel, so as to forge a culture of reconciliation, justice and peace'.²⁴ Bishops of dioceses and episcopal conferences give particular guidelines for this respectful relationship.

Relationship with Islam

As in the question of ecumenism, the intensity of the dialogue with the followers of the Islamic religion differs from countries and places. In some places Christians live harmoniously with Muslims, while in others there is an atmosphere of mistrust, hostility and prejudices on both sides, which creates a difficult environment for them to work together. However, the Catholic Church in Africa favours dialogues and collaborations in the face of these situations. There are occasions where 'Muslims have readily welcomed the documents of episcopal conferences. At the same time, the structures of the Church have sometimes served Muslim communities in the distribution of goods to the poor and needy...'.²⁵

Political Influence

The Catholic Church in Africa exercises notable influence in the politics of their particular countries through the prophetic voices of Bishops' Conferences that seek always to challenge bad governance, injustice, violation of human rights and wrong political ideologies working against the development of a healthy society. The Catholic position in social issues is always guided by the social teachings of the Church. The Catholic Church in Africa has always, therefore, stood in resolute defence of human life, which should be protected from the moment of conception until natural death occurs. Hence it condemns abortion and euthanasia, and pursues the promotion of the dignity of women²⁶ and the rights of children. The family occupies a place of priority in the Catholic Church in Africa. It strongly believes and teaches that marriage can only be a union between a man and a woman²⁷ and therefore opposes gay marriage, social acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex relationships. The Church however teaches that homosexual persons deserve respect.²⁸

²³ II Special Assembly for Africa, *The Church in Africa*, no.99.

²⁴ II Special Assembly for Africa, *The Church in Africa*, no. 101.

²⁵ II Special Assembly for Africa, *The Church in Africa*, 102.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to The Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice And Peace*, «You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world' (Mt. 5: 13-14), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011, Nos 55-59.

²⁷ Vatican, *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012, no.2202.

²⁸ Vatican, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2357-2358.

The relationship with the African Union is another important aspect of the Catholic Church in Africa. While the Holy See is an accredited non-member state to the African Union, SECAM has recently intensified efforts towards having a representation.²⁹ It is hoped that this will enhance the Catholic voice at the Union.

Challenges to the Catholic Church in Africa

The Special Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops for Africa not only demonstrate the vibrancy, but also highlight the internal and external challenges facing Catholicism on the continent. Prominent among these is the challenge of globalization, which seeks to import and impose cultures, ideologies, values that are neither coherent with the gospel message nor with African traditional value system. Others include the struggle for self-sufficiency, which is impeded by unjust global economic structures and high-level corruption among politicians and leaders of nations. Another great challenge is the situations of war, civil unrest, insecurity, religious extremism and terrorism. There is the challenge to build a strong platform favouring reconciliation, justice and peace. This entails a continuous process of healing of memories and working together in alleviating the pitiable humanitarian situations caused by wars, migration, famines, etc.

Other challenges are in the area of ecumenism, where there is still room for greater collaboration among Christians on the continent. This can be enhanced by greater efforts to reflect the activities of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity in Rome. On the question of dialogue with cultures, there is the challenge of ensuring the genuine enculturation of African values without compromising the deposit of the faith.

Another important challenge is the pursuit and promotion of the dignity of women in Africa and the protection of children against abuse. Finally, the church in Africa has to keep abreast of the use of modern technology in living the faith, including the adequate use of the mass media and social media in evangelization and in challenging the ills of society.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church in Africa is old but still young. It is obviously a growing Church with roots in the traditional teachings of the Catholic magisterium. It is a Church that offers hope to the future of Catholicism in the world, with its growing numbers and vocations to ministerial priesthood and religious life. It is also a Church that defines itself according to the family model and earnestly hopes for a better Africa under the maternal care of the Most Holy Mary, Our Lady Queen of Africa.

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²⁹ A first step towards having a representative of the Catholic Church at the African Union began in February 2015 with the appointment of the head of relations between SECAM and African Union in Addis Ababa who has the task of facilitating “the signing of an *Entente Cordiale Memorandum* for a SECAM Status of Observer to the African Union”.

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