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The Contributions of the African Church in Historical Perspective

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Chapter Eight

The Contributions of the African Church in Historical Perspective¹

“I am a black and beautiful daughter of Jerusalem... Look not upon me because I am black, because the sun has tanned me: The sons of my mother disliked me, made me to work in their vineyards. My own vineyard, I could not care.” (Song of Songs 1:5-6).

Prologue

John Bauer, a European missionary has ably demonstrated that Africa is his pride. At an early date Africa had to experience the lovelessness of the sons of her mother, the white men who devastated her vineyard and forced her to work in the vineyards of the other people, to live in slavery.

At an early date, it was believed that one should translate accusingly, as did Jerome: “I am black but beautiful”. However, the first Christian writing on Africa, insisted on “black and beautiful”, for it is the Church of Africa that her majority has chosen the fellowship of Christ, for the first time in the history of humanity. The black bride of the Songs sings her joy of life in all its human forms, but she also cries out her anguish when she has lost her bridegroom. It seems that in the present years, the joyful face of the African bride has become the sorrowful face of the black mother, who cries over so many of her children that languish in misery, victims of injustice, exploitation and oppression, who mourns those who died in famine and fraternal wars. But the song ends with the bride’s unshakeable faith: “stronger than death is love” (8:6-7).²

The Apostolic Period: Historical Background and Developments

In a way Africa is also the second homeland of Jesus of Nazareth. Persecuted in his own fatherland, Christ sought the hospitality of

¹ IKE, O.F.; paper delivered in Maternus Haus, Cologne, Germany at an event of the Church in Need in 2002

² Ref. Baur, J., 2000 years of Christianity in Africa Pauline Nairobi, 1994, p.5.

*the Egyptians. It was there where the little child sought refuge from the cruelty of Herod.*³

(Christianity in Africa is not a recent happening, nor is it a by-product of colonialism. Its roots go back to the very time of the Apostles. It is true that the evangelization of Africa has its beginnings at the very period of the birth of the church; witness of this is the baptism by Philip of the Ethiopian Eunuch, of Queen Candace, narrated in the Acts of the Apostles.⁴

Jewish Christianity: Link with the Apostles

A group of Christian Jews, living in Jewish settlements between 50-100 AD, constitutes the link of the Church in Egypt with the apostle. The unanimous Egyptian tradition venerates Saint Mark as the first Bishop of Alexandria (62 AD). Historians often dismiss this assertion because it is found only in the Church History of Eusebius (320 AD), and not in the earlier, extensive non-historical writings of Clement and Origen. But the authenticity of this tradition is supported by the fact that Mark was the companion of Peter to whom the mission to the Jews had been entrusted. Alexandria was the home of the greatest Jewish Diasporas; why should Peter and his spiritual son not have visited it? (I Pt. 5:13).

We may therefore with good reason refer to the year 62 AD as the founding date of the first Christian Church in Africa.⁵ This is when the Church began in that old and venerated part of African continent. This is followed by the period of martyrs. The period of the first council, that unforgettable activity of the Alexandrian Church, with their great theologians and saints who became the pillars of the universal church such as Athanasius, and a little later Saint Augustine, Saint Anthony the Hermit and the great ascetic tradition of the Fathers of the desert. All this is Africa. As you can see, the day of Africa in the Church has been going on for almost 2000 years.⁶

³ JP II, Inaugural Homily at Africa Synod on 9-4-94, Matt. 2:12-21.

⁴ Cf. Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8:27-37. Tomko, J., *Auditio I on Synodus Episoporum Coetus Specialis Pro Africa*, 14 April 1994, Vaticano, in: Documenti of Africa Synod, Reprinted by SNAAP, Enugu, 1995, A CIDJAP Publication, p.21.

⁵ Cf. Baur, J., *2000 years of Christianity in Africa*, Paulines, Nairobi, 1994, p.21.

⁶ Cf. John Paul II, Inaugural homily at Homily at Africa Synod in Rome, 9th April, 1994, in Africa Synod docs, op. cit. p.8.

Link with the Universal Church

During the first six centuries Egypt and North Africa formed one great communion with the other countries around the Mediterranean Sea: a common wealth of nations bound together by the Roman empire and still more deeply by the Christian faith. For a long time, the two regions held a leading position of the universal Church: Egypt in the Greek-speaking eastern part and North Africa in the Latin speaking western part. Nubia and Ethiopia, deeper in the African heartlands, received missionaries through Egypt and were dependent on the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, whom they defended with the power of their arms in times of danger. Recall the African synods of the first centuries, the activities of Origen and Saint Cyprian, the ecclesiological controversies that then divided Christianity. But those events were concentrated above all along the northern coasts of the continent.

From the very beginning of the Christian era, and even before that, Rome has felt united to Africa. Sons and daughters of Africa were already coming to Italy in the time of the ancient Roman Empire, just as they come today. It is not possible to recall all the historical details from the times before Christ, but it must be mentioned that from the beginning of the new era the children of Africa were present in the Church and exercised various ministries within the Church. There were also Africans among the Popes.

The Islamic Invasion and Development

The Church had been flourishing on the northern shore of this continent for six hundred years before Islam was born. A turning point in the development of ancient Christianity in Africa was the advent of Islam. It almost dried up the whole flow of Christian life: in time, the Church disappeared entirely from North Africa and Nubia. It was also heavily oppressed and restricted in Egypt, isolated and often attacked in Ethiopia. According to Church historian John Bauer, the subsequent history of Christian presence in Africa is for many centuries like a trickling stream through the desert. Yet God's providence never let it dry up and in our days it has become a great flood watering the whole continent

When Carthage, the last Christian stronghold in northern Africa, fell to the Arab assault in 697, there arose in the same year King Mercurious in Nubia who built up a Christian kingdom that reached from Aswan to the Blue Nile. When that kingdom succumbed to Turkish-Islamic attacks in 1270, there was a rebirth of the nine-hundred-year old Ethiopian Church. The restoration of the Solomon dynasty under Yikunno Amlak and the religious reform by Takla Haymanot, the great father of monasticism, brought new life to this unique

African Christian kingdom. There was a flourishing Christian culture on the mountains of Ethiopia, equalling that of medieval Europe, until much of it was destroyed by an Islamic jihad, which began in 1527.

But by that date, there was already another monarch carrying on the torch of faith: Afonso, King of the Congo, the first Christian ruler south of the Sahara. For twenty years he worked untiringly to establish a Christian Kingdom and in 1526, together with his son, the first native black African Bishop consecrated in Rome in 1518, Bishop Henrique, outlined a programme of evangelization to be carried to all the provinces of his realm. For over three hundred years, his successors were eager to maintain links with Rome; they brought as many as four hundred and forty Capuchins into the country in the course of a century and a half.

The Congolese kings were still desperately calling for new missionaries from Rome, when in 1792 the first permanent mission in South Africa was erected by the Moravians and in West Africa the first Church was established by emancipated slaves returning from America: Freetown in Sierra Leone, thus inaugurating the modern era of Christianity in Africa. Indeed, it was in so many places repatriated or liberated slaves who laid the foundation stones of the present Africa Church. Their settlements formed the bases from which concerted efforts were made to bring the good news of salvation in Christ to the tribal communities and into the very heart of the continent.

A Century of Rapid Growth

In reality the systematic evangelization of Africa began during the last century 1880 - 1990, through the work of some missionary institutes and the great advocates of the African mission: Cardinal. Lavigerie, founder of the Missionaries of Africa (formerly known as the White Fathers); Bishop Comboni, a future Blessed, the founder of the Comboni Fathers; Fr. Libermann of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit; the Capuchin Card. Massaia; the Vincentian St. Justin de Jascobis and others, such as Monsignor de Bresillac, founder of the Society of the African Missions, with the Jesuits, the Franciscans, and many congregations of women religious.

Abundant fruit was produced through their sweat and blood. The land of Africa has responded generously to Christ's call. In recent decades' various African peoples have just celebrated the first centenary of the beginning of their evangelization. The growth of the Church on this continent during our century is something of a miracle. The Holy Spirit is guiding these ecclesial communities rapidly in their maturation process.

Let it suffice to say that in the last 40 years the number has been increased. It is true, however, that the numerical growth of Catholics is also affected by the general population growth as a whole, from slightly more than 100 million in 1900 to 634,967,000 in 1993. It is also true that there is similar growth also among the other Christians who now account for 16.56% of the population, while Islam is flourishing with 41%.⁷ Adherents of the traditional religions represent 12.3% of the population.⁸ Today, Catholics account for 13.9 of the population. An undeniable, remarkable increase.

African Priests

Although growing rapidly in numbers, the growth rate of African priest is constant but slightly lower than that of the faithful as a whole:

- In 1927: 127.
- In 1933: 281 plus 3,539 foreigners for a total of 3,820.
- In 1949: 1,096 plus 6,366 foreigners for a total of 7,642.
- In 1955: 1,583 plus 8,757 foreigners for a total of 10,340.
- In 1959: 2,072 plus 9,931 foreigners for a total of 12,003.
- In 1969: 3,623, 11,477 foreigners for a total of 15,100.
- In 1975: 4,131, 11,172 foreigners for a total of 15,303.

In 1989, in Africa and Madagascar, we find 18,008 priests, 8,562 of whom are indigenous (7,655 diocesans and 907 religious) and thus the proportion of native priests was close to 50%. Today that ratio has already reached more than 65% of the total of 20,768 priests, 10,903 of whom are diocesan and 9,865 religious (*CF. Agenzia Fides of 2 October, 1993*).

However, the total of native priests and missionaries is far from adequate: in 1988 the ratio of priests to the general population was 1: 25,303 and the ratio of priests to Catholics was 1: 4,149 (Asia 1: 1,152; Europe 1: 1,270).

Women Religious

There has also been a noteworthy growth in the number of women religious. In year 1933 there were 10,109 including 1,982 Africans, and in year 1949 there were 14,346 including 4,202 Africans, almost 30% increase. After that

⁷ The data on Islam has been provided by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Section for Islam.

⁸ Cf. World Christian Encyclopedia op. cit. According to this source the Orthodox in Africa would account or 6.8% of the population.

there is a growth in the total number of women religious, but there is also a growth in the proportion of indigenous sisters, to the point of reaching in year 1989, 37,421 women religious including 21,986 Africans, almost 60%, and in year 1992, 43,976 women religious.

Institutions of Consecrated Life

In Africa today, there are nine indigenous institutes of consecrated life of Pontifical right; eight are women's and one is a congregation of brothers. There are also 110 Institutes of women religious and 22 men's Congregations of diocesan right. Except for the "*Filles du S. Coeur de Marie*" in Dakar, the first African religious institute, which was founded in 1858, all the others were founded in this century.

Major Seminaries

Major seminarians have been growing in number at a greater pace, especially in the last decade.

- In 1927 the 27 major seminaries had 336 students.
- In 1988 the 92 major seminaries had 8,149 students.
- In 1989 the 113 major seminaries had 10,892 students.
- In 1991 the 115 major seminaries had 11,415 students.
- In 1992 the 121 major seminaries had 11,951 students.
- In 1993 the 128 major seminaries had 12,391 students.

Catholic Universities

We should also mention the five university-level institutes in Africa, situated in Kinshasa, Nairobi, Abidjan, Port Harcourt and Yaoundé and one in Madagascar, Antananarivo.

Local Catechists

Africa has the great tradition of local catechists as pioneers in evangelization, and they deserve a great deal of the credit for the rapid spread of the gospel as follows;

- | | |
|-----------|---------|
| • In 1933 | 44,886 |
| • In 1949 | 63,498 |
| • In 1957 | 80,101 |
| • In 1980 | 132,578 |
| • In 1990 | 256,903 |
| • In 1993 | 285,526 |

Increased Number of Indigenous Bishops

However, the most significant change for the Church in Africa and Madagascar concerns the Bishops. Today there are 412 ecclesial jurisdictions, in addition to the 18 circumscriptions, 19 of which are currently vacant; 66 are still under the jurisdiction of missionary Bishops or of other missionary Ordinaries for example; the Superiors of the “*Missions Sui Iurisdictionis*”), while 327 are being governed by indigenous Bishops. To this number we must add the three Coadjutor Bishops and fifteen Auxiliaries, all of whom are indigenous, and a growing number of retired African Bishops so that the proportion of indigenous Bishops is close to 90%.

This growth, which had increased in pace since Vatican II, is all the more impressive if we consider that after the first but little-known Bishop of the Ethiopian Rite, Monsignor Ghidane Mariam Cassa, appointed to the See of Eritrea in 1930, the first two Latin-Rite African Bishops of our century are still recalled by many people. They were the Uganda Bishop J. Kiwanuka and the Bishop Ramarosandratana of Madagascar, consecrated on 29 October 1939 by Pope Pius XII. In 1959, the first English-speaking African Archbishop was appointed, Monsignor J.K. Amisah, and in 1960 the first Archbishop of Francophone Africa, Mons. B. Gantin. The first African Cardinal Cardinal Rugambwa, consecrated Cardinal by Pope John XXIII in 1960, is still among us, but now he has fourteen colleagues from his continent, including the adjacent islands.

Evaluation

In the face of these remarkable ecclesial realities there is only one possible explanation and one response: no human effort alone could have performed such a work in the course of a single century. Nevertheless, this is no cause for human triumph, rather the whole Church is to thank God and celebrate his wonderful kindness, because “*Fecit Nobis Magna Qui Potens est et Sanctum est Numen Eius!*”⁹

Thus, the world can see that the Church in Africa and Madagascar is a young, dynamic Church filled with life and potential, although fragile because of its youth. On the African continent too, it is a divine and human institution, with its light and dark sides, positive qualities and risky aspects due to its maturity level and to human weakness as well. Africa is economically poor, but has a

⁹ Cf. Tomko J. *Auditio I* at the Africa Synod in Rome, 1994, 14th April.

wealth of values and priceless qualities, which it can offer, to the other Churches and to humanity.