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Challenges Confronting the Church in the 21st Century

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Sommaire   *A l'aube du vingt-et-unième siècle, l'Eglise n'est plus en mesure d'imposer au monde ses choix et ses rythmes. Elle doit courageusement entrer en dialogue avec les institutions, les acteurs économiques, politiques et sociaux, et avec les structures qui peuvent influencer le cours des évènements. L'Eglise ne peut pas se retirer dans sa tour d'ivoire, et pontifier à tout propos; elle doit prendre part aux débats en cours, et se montrer prête à adopter ce que le théologien Jean-Marc Ela appelle "un christianisme aux mains sales". Elle doit s'associer aux autres structures qui constituent la société humaine, tout en restant consciente de sa mission propre d'évangélisation.*

Introduction (Naming the Reality)   The title of this article encapsulates something broad and, perhaps, too ambitious. How and where does one begin to outline the challenges facing *the* church in the 21st century? It would be less pretentious to discuss the challenges of a more geographically circumscribed and denominationally defined church. I postulate that this difficulty of talking about a church that is boundless in scope constitutes the very first challenge that confronts the community called church in the 21st century. Barring the existence of an unexpressed but pretentious presupposition in the title, namely, that 'church' is a univocal term, which could only refer to one and only one church, we would have to admit that the terminological designation is itself a challenge to the church. In the 21st century, the referent of the term 'church' is no longer as simple, easily identifiable and circumscribed as many people may have known it to be. The tension surrounding it exemplifies a process that one could describe as the 'complexification' of our understanding of church. When people talk about 'church' we can no longer say that both speaker and addressee form a common idea of the meaning; we cannot claim to know precisely what they mean by that term. What kind of church? Which church? What denomination? Where is it geographically located, socially situated? What is its doctrinal orientation or struc-

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ture of leadership and ministry? These are some of the details that one has to provide whenever one speaks or hears of the church in this day and age.[1]

The challenge posed by this difficulty of conceptualizing the church is particularly characteristic of the late 20th century; it promises to intensify in the 21st century. Yet, this challenge is surmountable. From a Christian perspective, no matter how complex the idea (and reality) of the community called church, it will still have to respond to certain universally acceptable criteria in order to be valid. For example, whatever constitutes the referent of the term 'church' should subscribe to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, espouse pertinent aspects of his life and teaching as recommended in the gospels, and accept a certain responsibility of charity and justice toward men and women of our time. Hence, when we say 'church' we have in mind the community of believers in the God of Jesus Christ and the practitioners of his message of salvation.

Globalization If the concept of church is problematic in the 21st century due to the difficulty of defining it, there is yet another challenge characteristic of contemporary times. Nowadays we speak routinely of globalization. This relatively new phenomenon poses a serious challenge to the church in the 21st century. A vast body of literature has emerged in the last decade of the 20th century on the meaning, implications and challenges of globalization for human society. But there remains a noticeable paucity of analyses on the challenges which globalization poses for the church in the 21st century. When as recently as 1997 American theologian Robert Schreiter published *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local*, his analyses of the meaning and implication of globalization for the church's mission and self-understanding were groundbreaking.[2] Happily, since his pioneering work, the issue of globalization is increasingly becoming a subject of theological debate. In 1999, T. Howland Sanks published a seminal article on "Globalization and the Church's Social Mission."[3] Both authors suggest, without the slightest hint of ambiguity, that the phenomenon known as globalization will significantly shape the theological and ecclesiological questions of the 21st century.

Without delving into the technicalities of the concept of globalization, suffice it to say that it is a multifaceted and multilayered process that determines the way we organize life in our technologically and culturally diversified societies.[4] In a very

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[1] In what concerns Africa, it may be instructive to recall the eponymous attempt by David Barrett to study the phenomenon of Independent Churches. One of the serious issues unearthed by his analysis was the complexity of the phenomenon called church. Thus, besides the fact that Africa is home to myriad of churches, the difficulty is not merely one of numerical increase, but also of the conceptual understanding of what 'church' means in this day and age. David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal: An Analysis of 6000 Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi, Kenya: Oxford University Press, 1968); see also Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh/Maryknoll, New York: Edinburgh University Press/Orbis Books, 1995).

[2] Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

[3] T. Howland Sanks, "Globalization and the Church's Social Mission," *Theological Studies* 60 (December 1999): 625-651.

[4] For a summary presentation of the meaning of globalization, see Sanks, "Globalization and the Church's Social Mission," 630-32.

broad sense, I would argue that globalization presents us with a multiple-tiered process: it increases the number of issues that can be addressed or dealt with, expands the body of stakeholders, and compresses the amount of time needed to address such issues. A terrorist attack in the United States, a famine in Malawi, a devastating flood in Mozambique, violent confrontation between the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, ethnic tension and violence in Kosovo... these are issues which receive global attention simultaneously and within a shorter-than-usual period of time. Because of this amazing development, many people find it convenient to refer to the world as a "global village." Yet, a global village is not necessarily a smaller world in size; it means we do more, cover more, take in more of the world issues, and we globalize local issues in less time that we had previously been able to do. While the modern forms of communication may constitute a powerful driving force behind this process, other factors, such as economics, politics and culture are not left out. The sum effect of this process is that more ideas and issues are processed with greater efficiency and seemingly lesser effort or stress. For example, issues as diverse as human rights, population control, women's rights, children's right, refugee flight, genetic engineering, female circumcision (or female genital mutilation)... have become truly global questions; they are dealt with on a larger world forum, and with increasing alacrity. Where does this process leave the church? For those of us who are products of the Catholic tradition, we may be used to a church which 'makes haste slowly.' In the 21st century, this church finds itself in a world that simply cannot afford to wait, a world that needs answers to many questions at the same time, that is, *now*. This is what I perceive as one of the greatest challenges which the process of globalization poses to the church in the 21st century. This process will continue to broaden the horizon of world issues and demand of the church a swifter and more decisive response.

Harmonization Versus Localization

The process of globalization is propelled by a certain kind of force which tends to pull diverse approaches, ideas and ways of proceeding in the direction of a common, that is, global, arena. This globalizing pull seems to impose on socio-economic and geo-political institutions the need to harmonize, integrate and unify their structures, world-views, laws and practices. As an identifiable structure within human society, the church is not immune to this globalizing pull. There is, however, another side to this process. One of the most interesting features of globalization is the emergence of a counter pull. This phenomenon can be presented as follows: It would seem as if the stronger the world's consciousness of local issues is drawn to and organized around a common, global platform, the stronger the forces tending toward the assertion of the uniqueness of the local identities which feed into this consciousness. If not, how do we explain the often violent resurgence of ethnic identities in places like Europe and Africa, where the emphasis on union, unity, integration, and community in the political and economic senses also tends to be strongest?[5] What about the dogged resistance of localized economies and various

[5] I have in mind here the European Union and the recently inaugurated African Union. We could also note the increasing tendency of political leaders to speak of certain issues in terms of the so-called 'International Community.'

anticapitalist groups to the globalizing agenda of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the G-7 (or G-8, if we include Russia), NATO, etc.?

In a more radical sense, the same challenge (pull versus counter pull) rears its head in the church. This latter, in response to the globalizing pull, may opt to universalize or centralize its doctrines, practices and structures of worship, ministry and leadership, but it must also answer to the exigencies, practices and expectations of its local constitutive communities. In this regard, the challenge facing the church is how to strike a creative balance between its identity as a universal community and the exigencies of local communities.[6] The universal church is not simply a homogenous agglomeration of the latter. Nor are the local communities merely undifferentiated, faceless branches of the former. Briefly stated, the challenge is about universalizing the local and localizing the universal.[7] How the church achieves this crucial balance remains a significant challenge in the 21st century.

Poverty and justice It is a commonly held view that the fortunes of the church in Europe and North America are dwindling, while they are on the increase in other regions, such as Africa, South America and in some parts of Asia.[8] This observation, to be valid, must be understood primarily in numerical terms. While it is the case that fewer people now occupy the pews on Sundays in Europe and North America, it is no less true that the church in these places remains relatively more financially buoyant. The church in Europe and North America continues to lend financial support to the church in Africa and South America. In itself this situation poses the question of the independence and self-sufficiency of the so-called Third-World churches. The challenge contained in this question for the church is glaring enough to render any extensive commentary unnecessary.

Still on the issue of the fortunes of the church, it would seem that the serious decline in church affiliation and attendance in the technologically advanced countries of the West stems partly from the increasing economic or material affluence and scientific breakthroughs which leave only a narrow margin for God as source and sustainer of the universe. Again, the reverse holds true for the so-called Third-World or developing countries: the numerical fortunes of the church in these countries look buoyant in the present, and promising in the future, just as the material fortunes look bleak. This is a challenge for the church in the 21st century. How does one formulate this challenge? Obviously when we notice the precarious situation of poverty, violence, debt, human rights abuses... precisely in those places where church attendance and affiliation attain record levels, we need to ask the question: What are the people looking for in the church? In other words, why turn to the church in the midst of so much misery?[9] The church may offer a place of

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[6]Sanks, "Globalization and the Church's Social Mission," 650.

[7]One social scientist, Roland Robertson, speaks of this process as "glocalization." See Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 12.

[8]Many theologians have welcomed this trend as symbolizing the emergence of a truly global community called church, one that takes into account the importance of Third-World churches. See Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*; Walbert Bulhmann, *The Coming of the Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and the Future of the Church* (Slough, England: St. Paul Publications, 1974).

[9]A. E. Orobator, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 173.

belonging to people who would otherwise be faceless and marginalized bodies in a hostile society. But, what else? What has the church to offer beyond or besides providing temporary consolation in the midst of excruciating poverty? The magnitude and variety of problems which the people bring to the church in the so-called Third-World countries cannot be solved or even assuaged by a convenient recourse to remedies founded on the principles of a benevolent and charitable theology. Action on a more structural level, not pious exhortation, is needed to face the precarious situation of the people of God in those places where their dignity is most threatened. Again, one can detect here a challenge for the church in the 21st century.

Emerging Social Mentalities   At different times, and in different places, the church has had to contend with contemporary mentalities whose orientations it judged inimical to its identity and mission. In not a few instances the church's response proved to be grossly inadequate. Sometimes when stronger political forces allied with the contemporary mentality, the church found it necessary to become defensive. At other times, when those same political forces allied with the interests of the church, it became possible for the church to adopt an overtly aggressive stance vis-a-vis the threat posed by prevailing secularizing mentality. There was the age of the Reformation; there was the age of the Enlightenment. The bitter struggle with Modernism and Liberalism is still fresh in the annals of church history. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Vatican Council II opted for respectful openness and constructive dialogue, rather than aggressive confrontation with contemporary mentality.[10] The wisdom in this approach lies in the fact that such mentality which appears to be dangerous may provide not only new grounds for evangelization, but also the tools or means for realizing the church's evangelizing mission. One may, as one instance of this trend, think of the way the church has used the modern means of social communication to spread the Word. The 21st century will witness greater innovations in the field of communication. The Internet, for example, continues to gain ascendancy as a forum for shaping and disseminating information in much the same way it serves as a strong tool for creating a culture or a way of being that is less tangible but more potent than anything we have ever experienced. The idea of Christ meeting culture is not a new one. In a similar fashion, the church would need to encounter this contemporary culture and discover in it not just a threat but yet another arena and means for realizing the Gospel imperative to go and preach the good news to the ends of the earth.

Speaking of the encounter between Christianity and contemporary culture, one of the many ways in which Vatican Council II considered the church was to employ the metaphor of a pilgrim.[11] Other Christian traditions may also subscribe to the idea of the church as a community which travels along a path that runs through contemporary society here on earth in hope of attaining the promise of final salvation. The theological image of a pilgrim church does not, however, exonerate the

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[10]See 'Gaudium et Spes' The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World; Jozef van Beeck, Catholic Identity After Vatican II: Three Types of Faith in the One Church (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 1-21.
[11]'Lumen Gentium' The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

tangible community called church from engaging the structures of the world of which it forms part in a creative and mutually enriching dialogue. The extent to which the church can achieve this crucial dialogue would determine the relevance and credibility of its message in the 21st century.

Conclusion At the dawn of the 21st century, the Body of Christ on earth finds itself in a world where it no longer enjoys its erstwhile privilege of unilaterally dictating the pace and the course of events. For the church, therefore, the key imperative here would be to courageously enter into dialogue with structures, institutions, and other socio-economic and political actors who have the wherewithal to influence the course of human progress. So, it is no longer enough for the church to simply retreat to a moral high ground and pontificate on world events; the church is challenged to join the fray, to adopt what one African theologian, Jean-Marc Ela, has called "Christianity with dirty hands." In other words, the church must act, and its actions must speak louder than its words. For this to happen today, the church must form partnership with other constituent structures of human society, while constantly aware not only of its evangelizing mission, but also of the profound wisdom embedded in the Teacher's counsel: "For whoever is not against us is for us" (*Mk* 9:40).