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# Look Back to the Future Transformative Impulses of Vatican II for African Catholicism

AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR, SJ

A recent account of what happened at the Second Vatican Council recalls the term *aggiornamento* ('bringing up to date') 'as a shorthand expression . . . to describe what the Council was about'.<sup>1</sup> Rare are the African languages that translate *aggiornamento* or render its variant meaning in their vocabulary. This observation supports the view that Vatican II bypassed Africa. Judging by the small number of indigenous bishops, the 'presence of Africa at Vatican II was marginal and by proxy'; thus, 'Africa had little effect on Vatican II itself'.<sup>2</sup> Understandably, compared to the optimism generated in the West, Christians in Africa 'have not felt the same affinity with the Council'.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, however, the intervening years have witnessed a phenomenal growth of African Catholicism in ways that 'may well have become possible only because of the changes initiated by the Council'.<sup>4</sup> Vatican II generated momentous impulses not for updating or renewal (for the Church in Africa was still 'a newborn community trying to find its place in a fast-moving continent'<sup>5</sup>) but for the growth of Catholicism in Africa.

## I Historical context

At the cusp of Pope John XXIII's historic convocation of Vatican II, Africa swirled in a vortex of historical turbulence, political revolution, and religious transformation. Three events illustrate the thrust of this vortex. First, in reaction to the oppressive European colonialism that 'had carved up large chunks of Africa' in the service of Western economic and political interests,<sup>6</sup> Africa experienced an effervescence of nationalism and political emancipation. Not unlike African churches, new nations were emerging

from the dying embers of colonialism. Second, similarly, albeit of a different order, African theology was tracing and defining the contours of its identity in the context of indigenous cultures and religions. Third, directly related to the second factor, churches in Africa were interrogating their parent bodies in view of acquiring autonomy, selfhood, and self-reliance.<sup>7</sup> These historical events define the context of the impulses generated by Vatican II for the mission and nature of the Church in Africa, the growth of African Catholicism, the development of African theology, and the inculturation of Catholicism in Africa.

## **II Ecclesiology, theology, inculturation and Catholicism in Africa since Vatican II**

Laurenti Magesa has observed that 'perhaps the most important consequence of Vatican II for African Catholicism was the convocation in 1994 of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa or African Synod, almost three decades after the closing of the Council'.<sup>8</sup> Almost 50 years later, a second African Synod took place in Rome. The combination of synodal assemblies confirms the maturation and self-confidence of African Catholicism. Characteristically, this development is represented in demographic and statistical terms that indicate an exponential growth of African Catholicism from just nine per cent of the population in 1910 to 63 per cent in 2010.<sup>9</sup> The vitality of African Catholicism since Vatican II is quantifiable not only in numbers but more in terms of its position as a critical partner in the Third Church and a key player in shaping the next Christendom.<sup>10</sup> The issues that African Catholicism brings to the table strain traditional categories and open up new directions in the tradition of Vatican II's *aggiornamento*.<sup>11</sup>

Since Vatican II, the Church in Africa has discovered its public role, vocation, and mission in the socio-economic and political arena. This consciousness shows in the outcomes of the second African Synod (2009) that identified the Church in Africa as agent of reconciliation, justice, and peace.<sup>12</sup> A similar process has occurred in the theological self-understanding of the Church. The first African Synod contextualized Vatican II's ecclesiology of the 'people of God' as the 'family of God', understood as the new way of being church in Africa. It must be said that 'To the African Church the idea ("people of God") was not really new. The people never had known anything else in their experience'.<sup>13</sup> Yet one of

the unfulfilled impetuses of Vatican II is the potential of the African Church to shed its dependence on the Western Church for material and financial sustenance. The lack of progress in this area indicates that 'the Catholic Church in Africa is clearly under colonial administration'.<sup>14</sup>

African theology emerged in difficult circumstances. The debate about the principle, necessity, and validity of '*une théologie de couleur africaine*'<sup>15</sup> predates Vatican II; but, 'the outward-looking decrees of Vatican II itself, of course, gave a new impetus to this movement....'<sup>16</sup> On the eve of the Council, Eurocentric theologians argued against African theology as a legitimate branch of theological scholarship.<sup>17</sup> That would change when, first, in the wake of Vatican II's *Ad gentes*, Pope Paul VI rallied the African Church with a clarion call: '... you may, and you must, have an African Christianity'; and, second, Pope John Paul II used the term 'African theology' publicly on 9 April 1985.

The emergence and development of African theology happened in the context of African religion. Although Vatican II does not mention African religion by name, by virtue of its *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)*, the Council 'slightly opened the door for consideration of African religion as a dialogue'.<sup>18</sup> This implied the recognition of African religious traditions as a valid context for the salvific activity of the risen Christ and a fertile soil for the implantation of the Church of Christ (*Nostra aetate* 2-3; *Ad gentes* 6; *Lumen gentium* 16).<sup>19</sup> In this sense, 'Vatican II's openness and tolerance toward various cultures and religions may be its most important contribution to the Church in Africa'.<sup>20</sup> In the light of the foregoing, inculturation represents one of the impetuses of Vatican II for the growth of Catholicism and the development of theology in Africa.<sup>21</sup> Although Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum concilium* was initially interpreted and confined to the adaptation of liturgical symbols and practices,<sup>22</sup> in time it has come to be understood as a radical transformation of the whole life of the Church in the light of the Gospel. The Council prompted liturgical creativity and experimentation drawing on 'the spiritual adornments and gifts' of African cultures (*Sacrosanctum concilium* 37). Examples abound of liturgical rites that employ rich symbolisms of African cultures and religious traditions.<sup>23</sup> Yet, there are attempts to impose limits on the scope of Paul VI's idea of an African Christianity and, thus, reverse the movement of liturgical creativity and renewal stimulated by Vatican II. Ecclesiastical and bureaucratic control means that the score sheet of liturgical inculturation 'remains unimpressive'.<sup>24</sup> According to Mageša,

'currently, in view of Roman systematic centralization after the centrifugal phenomenon spearheaded by Vatican II, it is becoming more difficult for an initiative of this kind even to be submitted to Rome: many bishops are either afraid or embarrassed to do so'.<sup>25</sup>

### III Vatican III: 'Look to the future without fear'<sup>26</sup>

Africa's theological memory of Vatican II is sparse, pithy, and uneventful. Notwithstanding Karl Rahner's glowing assessment of Vatican II as an epoch-making 'first assembly of the world-episcopate',<sup>27</sup> history shows that at this 'Council of the world-Church', 'only sporadic voices were heard from Africa'.<sup>28</sup> The largely expatriate African episcopate 'dealt only with matters internal to their Churches: liturgical and, above all, canonical and disciplinary issues'.<sup>29</sup> In the intervening years, as the hitherto unquestioned fusion of Christianity and the West has collapsed, vibrant and dynamic new voices have emerged outside the traditional historical enclaves of Catholicism.

The southward shift of global Catholicism means that the 'joys and hopes; pain and anguish' of African Catholicism are no longer peripheral to world Catholicism. The former delineates a new ecclesial context that generates an acute consciousness of new concerns and challenges, such as the participation of women in ecclesial ministry and leadership; the place of 'the grief and anguish... of the poor and afflicted' in the missiological purview of the global church; the escalating threat of militant Islam; globalization and its attendant cultural, economic, and political consequences; the quest for ecclesial autonomy; ethnic rivalry; systemic corruption; and multi-directional flows of migrants and forcibly-displaced peoples. To respond to these challenges and offer credible answers to these questions, the African Church not only needs to 'look back on the Council to seek guidance';<sup>30</sup> also, more importantly, it looks to a future Third Vatican Council, spearheaded by the Third Church, to generate a 'new Pentecost' of renewal and updating of the world-Church.

#### Notes

1. John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, Mass., 2008, pp. 9, 37.
2. Patrick A. Kalilombe, 'The Effect of the Council on World Catholicism: Africa', in Adrian Hastings (ed.), *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, London, 1991, pp. 310-11.

3. Norman P. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History*, New York, 2001, p. 111.
4. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
5. Kalilombe, 'The Effect of the Council on World Catholicism', *op. cit.*, p. 311.
6. Curt Cadorette, *Catholicism in Social and Historical Contexts: An Introduction*, Maryknoll, New York, 2009, p. 183.
7. For example, the 'moratorium' debate advocated the suspension of foreign financial resources and missionary personnel to allow churches in Africa room to generate their resources locally. See Cedric Mayson, *Why Africa Matters*, Maryknoll, New York, 2010, pp. 134–5.
8. Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll, New York, 2004, p. 130.
9. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population* (December 2011), [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Christian/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Christian/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf). Accessed on 28 December 2011.
10. See Walbert Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church, Slough, 1976; Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford, 2002.
11. See John L. Allen, *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, New York, 2009, pp. 13–53.
12. See Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation), 19 November 2011; Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, 'Introduction: the Synod as Ecclesial Conversation', in Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: the Second African Synod*, Maryknoll, New York, 2011, pp. 1–3.
13. Robert G. Donders, *Non-Bourgeois Theology: An African Experience of Jesus*, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, p. 189.
14. Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Maryknoll, New York, 1996, p. 59.
15. [Tr.: 'a theology of African colour'] T. Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine*, Kinshasa, DRC, n. d., p. 56; A. Ngindu Mushete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine*, Paris, 1989, pp. 42–7.
16. John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, p. 11.
17. See a more extensive account in Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, pp. 1–24.
18. Laurenti Magesa, 'On Speaking Terms: African Religion and Christianity in Dialogue', in Orobator, *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
19. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, p. 29.
20. Laurenti Magesa, 'The Council of Trent and the African Experience', in James F. Keenan (ed.), *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future*, Maryknoll, New York, 2011, p. 53.
21. Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, *op. cit.*, p. 42; Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, Maryknoll, New York & London, 1988, pp. 47–50 (Eng. trans. of *Ma foi d'Africain* (1985).
22. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, pp. 191–5.
23. Examples include eucharistic liturgies, initiation rites, consecration rituals, liturgical music, and worship gestures in West, Central, and East Africa. See Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An Orientation*, Colleagueville, MN, 1997, pp. 270–317; *A Listening Church*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

24. Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language*, pp. 30–4.
25. Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
26. 'Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council', on 11 October 1962, in W. M. Abbot (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, London & Dublin, 1966, p. 712.
27. Karl Rahner, 'Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council', in *Concern for the Church: Theological Investigations XX*, London & New York, 1981, p. 80.
28. Kalilombe, 'The Effect of the Council on World Catholicism', *op. cit.*, p. 310.
29. Giuseppe Alberigo & Joseph A. Komonchak (eds), *History of Vatican II*, vol. I, English ed., Maryknoll, New York & Leuven, 1995, p. 390.
30. Alberigo & Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 311.