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The Church in Africa: Salt of the Earth?

Joseph Ogbonnaya

Marquette University, joseph.ogbonnaya@marquette.edu

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initiatives. This will require those who work in this commission to be ready to take an active part in the activities of their particular local or national governments, as well as those of other stakeholders in development programs. It also demands adequate training of JDPC staff in the areas of socio-political and economic analysis and other relevant disciplines dealing with integral, sustainable development. Where such a commission has not been established, initiatives should be taken to create one.

Mahatma Gandhi reputedly said, "Be the change you expect to see." In its activities, beginning with the pastoral lifestyle in parishes, the African Church must ensure justice, transparency, and equity. This includes providing significant equal opportunities for the integration of all the various sectors into the life of the Church, according to each person's or group's abilities.

For instance, a pastor dealing with a particular issue of concern to the whole community should adopt a decision-making process that would involve the entire community in the resolution of the problem. This enhances the importance of shared life and mission and promotes a sense of belonging, an important aspect of integral, sustainable development.

In responding to the reality of internal divisions, parish communities with a diverse or multi-ethnic demography must first appreciate this diversity and then positively harness its energies, all the while treading lightly to avoid any manipulative or oppressive action.

These recommendations are made with full awareness of the undesirable tendency to generalize issues and to presume a concept or practice from one culture or region inevitably applies to the whole of Africa. These are not hard and fast rules that must apply in every instance. It is for each parish and diocese to discern what is feasible in the unique circumstances of their particular church and milieu.

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The Church in Africa: Salt of the Earth?

Joseph Ogbonnaya

Introduction

OUR SUBJECT MATTER IS A question aimed at assessing the performance of the Church in Africa.¹ Are the churches in Africa seen as salt and light? That is, do they give taste to the food of life? Do they give flavor/meaning to the lives of African Christians?

How do they impact the life of African peoples? As salt, do they preserve life, enriching the culture and tradition of the people, or have they become tasteless? If so, are the people aware? What do the people do about it? Hang onto their Church, abandon it, seek to inform it? If so, for how long will they remain as Christians within the Church?

Are the churches in Africa the light by which people see; the guide to their lives? Are they able to dispel the darkness of people's lives? Do they have light themselves, or are they blind guides leading the blind? Are they sacraments of salvation for the teeming population of Africa, converting in the millions to faith in Jesus Christ?

1. By "the Church" here, we refer to the Catholic Church. So when we say churches in Africa we shall be referring to the various Catholic churches in Africa. This in no way implies that the other Christian churches are not seen as salt of the earth for Africa. We acknowledge that they, in many and in various ways, are involved in the life of Africa and are contributing to the socio-economic and political as well as the religious life of the people of Africa. It is just that our subject matter is limited to the African Catholic Church.

Do the African peoples find solace in the Church in their plight—in their sufferings, anxieties, sorrows, frustrations, joys, and hopes? With a people reputed to be deeply religious, does the Church satisfy the deep yearnings of African spirituality—or are African Christians forced to seek solace and satisfaction elsewhere, while remaining nominal members of the Church? In effect, what type of light does the Church in Africa radiate: weak, bright, little glow, or full light?

The Church as the Salt of the Earth

Of course, the backdrop of our assessment will be the Gospel understanding of salt and light as defining characteristics of the People of God and Christian faith:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lamp-stand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.”²

By describing the individual Christian—and, by extension, the entire People of God—as the salt of the earth, Jesus meant that Christians and the Church must be examples of purity: holding high the standards of life, such as honesty, conscientiousness, morality, diligence in work, etc. S/he must be conscientious in speech, in conduct, and even in thought. In the ancient world, salt was the commonest of all preservatives, used to keep things from going bad and rotten; in the world today, the Christian, as the salt of the earth, must keep the earth from corruption. As the biblical scholar William Barclay explains: “The Christian must be the cleansing antiseptic in any society in which he happens to be; he must be the person who by his presence defeats corruption and makes it easier for others to be good.”³

The Church as the salt of the earth must promote good over evil; she must not only preach justice but see that it is done. She must, by the

2. Matt 5:13–16.

3. Barclay, *Matthew*, 116.

example of her life and ministry, keep corruption at bay in all facets of human life. By recognizing impurities in people's attitudes and values and purifying them, the Church will rightly be the salt of the earth. She does this well in her ministry of reconciliation, whereby peace is made not only between God and humanity but within humanity itself.

Last, but not in any sense the least, another quality of salt is that it adds flavor to things. The Church as the salt of the earth lends flavor to life. She gives meaning and zest to life. Food without salt will be insipid; similarly, a Church that is not the salt of the earth will be colorless and uninteresting, dull, lifeless, and useless.

As the sacrament of salvation (*Lumen Gentium* Arts. 1, 9, and 48), the world's sole sanctifier, in line with the mission of its founder and head—Christ, the absolute action of God, and the universal sacrament of encounter with God—the Church must be the salt of the earth, upholding values and standards in life. As the *sacramentum* of the world's salvation, the Church appears as the communion of faith, hope, and love (Arts. 8, 64, 65), as well as the Church of the Trinity. Moreover, she is not just the Church of hierarchical power and sacraments, but also the Church of the charismatics (Art. 12) and the Church of martyrs (Art. 42). Finally, the Church sees herself as the Church of the poor and the oppressed (Art. 8, 41).⁴

It is only by rising to the challenge of this image of herself as working for the integral salvation of humankind that the Church can truly be seen as the salt of the earth. This implies mediating in the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural life of the people, and remedying wrongs through reconciliation, justice, and peace. This is the barometer of our assessment of the Church as the salt of the earth in Africa.

Let us begin by painting a picture of the situation as things stand in Africa today.

The Contemporary African Scene

The contemporary picture of Africa is one of “failed” states, marred by chaos and anarchy, corruption and greed, hyper-inflationary trends, poverty and disease, ethnic rivalries, and religious conflicts.⁵

4. Rahner, *Church After Council*, 72.

5. The Synodal Assembly for Africa sadly had this to say about the continent: “One common situation, without doubt, is that Africa is full of problems. In almost all our

The *Lineamenta* for the Second Synod for Africa decried some of these worrisome situations in Africa including the widespread deterioration in the standard of living, insufficient means of educating the young, the lack of elementary health and social services with the resulting persistence of endemic diseases, the spread of the terrible scourge of AIDS, the heavy and often unbearable burden of the international debt, the horror of fratricidal wars fomented by unscrupulous arms trafficking, and the shameful, pitiable spectacle of refugees and displaced persons.⁶

But, paradoxically, all this bad news is accompanied by a significant increase in the number of conversions to Christianity. According to the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2003*, in 1978, Catholics numbered about 55 million (12.4 percent of the African population); in 2003, they numbered almost 144 million (17 percent, 25 years later). According to 2004 statistics, the faithful now total 148,817,000, with 630 bishops and 31,259 priests, of whom 20,358 are diocesan and 10,901 religious. Moreover, there are 7,791 lay brothers, 57,475 consecrated women, and 375,656 catechists. Membership in the African Catholic Church keeps on growing. The *Pontifical Yearbook 2007* indicates that of 1.115 billion Catholics worldwide—an increase of 1.5 percent of Catholics compared with the 1.098 billion the previous year—there was a 3.1 percent increase of Catholics in Africa, while the population has grown by slightly less than 2.5 percent. The increase in the number of priests and religious is put at 3.55 percent. As the Vatican statement noted: “Asia and Africa proportionately had more priests; [they] together provided 19.58% of the world’s overall number in 2004; in 2005 their contribution had risen to 20.28%. In 2005, of every 100 candidates to the priesthood in the whole world, 32 were American, 26 Asian, 21 African, 20 European and one from Oceania.”⁷

Going by the above statistics, the Church in Africa numerically is surely a vibrant Church, with great prospects—a citadel of hope for the future of Christianity as a religion, with great potential for evangelizing

nations, there is abject poverty, tragic mismanagement of available resources, political instability and social disorientation. The results stare us in the face: misery, wars, despair. In a world controlled by rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 40).

6. *Lineamenta* #8.

7. “Number of Catholics and Priests Rises, *Pontifical Yearbook of 2007 Releases Data*.” Online: <http://www.jknirp.com/numcat.htm>.

the universal Church. As Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged, Africa “is the great hope of the Church.”⁸ Likewise, as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, the Church is expected to have made and to be making significant improvements in the life of Africans. Evidence of this abounds in such areas as health care, education, provision of social amenities like pipe-borne water, and the presence of community banks that provide loans to individuals and cooperative societies for small-scale businesses. In fact, in many African countries, the Church is the only viably functioning institution enabling people to continue to live and hope in a better future.⁹

However, the sad reality in the growth of Christianity in Africa includes the continuing African condition of poverty, penury, and want. In the words of a Kenyan author, George Kinoti:

Experts tell us that Christianity is growing faster in Africa than on any other continent, at the same time the people are rapidly becoming poor and the moral and the social fabrics of society are disintegrating. Christianity is not making a significant difference to African nations. Why should this be so? The main reason is that we . . . failed to apply the gospel to the whole life and limited it to spiritual life only. We read the Scriptures selectively, placing emphasis on those (verses) that talked about salvation and neglecting those that talked about justice and material well being.¹⁰

Kinoti’s statement lends credence to the situation of endemic poverty and disease under which African peoples live today. And, as deeply religious people, African Christians run to God through the Church as the sacrament of salvation for relief. The Church will surely be seen as irrelevant if, through its ministry, it is unable to lift African peoples up in many visible ways. As Julius Nyerere, the former President of Tanzania, said:

Unless we participate actively in the rebellion against those social structures and economic organizations which condemn men to poverty, humiliation and degradation, then the Church will become irrelevant to man and the Christian religion will degenerate into a set of superstitions accepted by the fearful. Unless the Church, its members and its organizations, express God’s love for man by involvement in the present conditions of man, then it will

8. Benedict XVI, “Discourse,” 7.

9. *Lineamenta* #6.

10. “The Shifting Contexts of Sin,” in Ryan, *Structures, Seeds*, 15.

become identified with injustice and persecution. If this happens, it will die—and, humanly speaking, deserve to die—because it will then serve no purpose comprehensible to modern man.¹¹

Although the Church exists as a sacrament to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God and to accomplish the salvation of human-kind, she cannot do this without paying attention to the well-being of human beings in the world. As the document for the engagement of the Church in the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*) clarifies, the Church fulfills its mission notably “in the way it heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, in the way it consolidates society, and endows the daily activities of men [and women] with a deeper sense of meaning.”¹²

Therefore, the Church in Africa must face more seriously both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of her apostolate, intrinsic in her nature as a Church. One is reminded here of the beautiful and much-quoted words of the bishops of the world in the Synodal document *Justice in the World* (JW): “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”¹³

Evangelization cannot go on without paying attention to the human condition of the people evangelized.¹⁴ The Fathers of the Special Assembly for Africa noted this challenge: “In Africa, the need to apply the gospel to concrete life is felt strongly. How could one proclaim Christ on that immense continent while forgetting that it is one of the world’s poorest regions? How could one fail to take into account the anguished history of a land where many nations are still in the grip of famine, war, racial and tribal tensions, political instability and the violation of human rights? This is a challenge to evangelization.”¹⁵

11. Nyerere, “Church’s Role,” 119.

12. “*Gaudium et Spes* #40,” in Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 826.

13. Gremillion, *Gospel*, 514.

14. Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* emphasized this connection of the relationship between the gospel message and the concrete situations of human life. And Pope John Paul II restated this in his address at the Puebla Conference in Mexico January 1979: “The Church has learned that an indispensable part of its evangelizing mission is made up of works on behalf of justice and human promotion.”

15. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 51.

And the human condition today, including that of Africa, cannot be divorced from the world of today. Therefore, we must pay attention to the prevailing condition of the world within which the Faith is proclaimed in Africa.

The Challenge of Globalization

The socio-economic, political, and cultural situation under which the Church in Africa exists and evangelizes today is marked by consumption and competition, capital and profit, subjugation and terrorism. Coupled with this are philosophical presuppositions of mechanistic and materialistic perception of human beings not as persons, but in terms of what they produce or consume. In common parlance, the Church today exists in an age of globalization, with all its attendant benefits and defects.

Globalization is built on self-interest and capital, as well as maximization of profits. It is founded on a mechanistic, organistic understanding of human beings as means to an end—as labor for production and consumer of goods and services—and as such, as expendable and subordinate to corporate organizations. Little wonder such international financial organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank insist on capital accumulation. Development is seen in terms of economic growth, without due consideration of the general well being or condition of the human person. Thus, while globalization has contributed greatly to economic integration of a world market and to information technology, it has had an adverse effect: accentuating the rich/poor divide in the world, and with it, insensitivity to human suffering. The major consequences of globalization include unregulated free-market imbalances in trade, accumulation of capital by the rich, and marginalization of the poor.

Africa and other Third World countries feel the impact of such socio-economic conditions and policies adversely. In Africa, globalization undermines the role of the state, cedes its powers to transnational corporations. This makes the state impotent in the face of the plight of its people and even compels it to withdraw welfare schemes that would cushion the effects of stringent economic measures.

Since the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programs, which provided the launching pad for globalization in Africa, foreign economic policies have been introduced into Africa under the guise of

domestic policy. These policies are drawn by the international financial institutions—the IMF and the World Bank—mainly to protect their own interests. For instance, the oil multinational corporations including Shell, Mobil, Exxon, AGIP, Chevron, Texaco, etc., in Nigeria fashioned a vision called Vision 2010 and sold it to the late dictator General Sanni Abacha who, in his bid for legitimacy, bought the policy aimed at subjugating the indigenes of the oil producing states whose farms and means of livelihood, waters etc., are destroyed by oil spillage. This General eventually executed the environmental activist from Ogoni, Ken Saro Wiwa, for speaking out against the environmental degradation his people were going through because of the oil spillage.

On account of globalization, more and more African countries have been plunged into debt; African life expectancy rates have plummeted; many people have been laid off their jobs; crime has increased; and violence has become the order of the day. All the promises of globalization¹⁶—combating poverty through growth in the private sector; creating avenues for employment, better standards of living and such—are reversed in Africa. Kwame Boafo-Arthur aptly summed up the impact of globalization on Africa thus: “Although one cannot deny the relevance of other compelling explanatory variables for Africa’s classic underdevelopment such as civil strife, corruption in high places, high birth rates and, therefore, high population growth, etc., the fact still remains that the problems have been aggravated by globalization.”¹⁷

Arguing against the backdrop of liberalization of trade and protectionism by the West—through which they flood their goods to developing countries, and yet subsidize their farmers, making it impossible for developing countries to compete in the unfair trade—Carol Goar specifies the effects of globalization arising from imbalances in trade on the developing countries of the South:

Meanwhile, in Africa, local markets are being flooded with mass-produced Western exports. Domestic farmers can’t compete, let

16. Pro-globalization theorists see globalization as the one and only system out there to lift humanity from poverty and poised to increase human wellbeing. According to them globalization is both economically and socially benign, increasing overall wealth and positively impacting poverty, literacy, gender equality, cultural autonomy, and diversity; cf. K. Ohmae, *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of Regional Economies* (London: Harper Ellis, 1995), cited in Ilesanmi, “Leave No Poor Behind,” 76.

17. Boafo-Arthur, “Dilemmas,” 39.

alone export their meager produce. The continent’s fledgling textile industry is reeling from a WTO decision to throw open Western markets to products from China and India. Factories are closing, incomes are falling and jobs are disappearing . . . What experience has taught Africans and their impoverished Asian neighbors is that life was better before globalization; trade deals do more harm than good; and Western governments can’t be trusted.¹⁸

Globalization is neither a linear, uniform, nor homogenizing process. Nor does it address inequalities in the international political economy. While pro-globalists might extol its successes, the fact that globalization creates inequalities is beyond doubt, at least in those parts of the world where people are left behind in the economic system and where policies aimed at advancing capital marginalize and increase the suffering of the poor, weak, and less privileged. And so our assessment of the Church in Africa as the “salt of the earth,” for both Africans and the world, must show how she has contributed to human promotion of the African peoples and how she is responding to globalization.

One is led into posing various questions:

- In what ways has the Church in Africa lifted the African peoples from poverty, penury, and want?
- Has she been involved in development efforts in Africa? How does the Church in Africa respond to globalization?
- What is the Church doing to be relevant and to counter the persistent degradation of the human person arising from globalization?
- Should the Church do anything, or is it outside the tangent of her vocation to meddle in globalization?
- What type of spirituality should drive the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa?

Since we have passed the age-old dichotomy of the Church and the world, the spirituality of the Church in the contemporary age must be different. The Church has redefined itself in the Second Vatican Council as the People of God, affected by the condition of her peoples and ready to ameliorate her conditions with determination to stand for justice and

18. Goar, “Protectionism’s Fresh Appeal.”

peace. How this is carried out will surely determine the Church in Africa as the salt of the earth.

First, let's examine the Church in Africa's involvement in human promotion.

The Church in Africa and Human Development

From the days of the missionaries to the present, the Church in Africa has focused its development strategy in Africa in two areas: education and health care. As of December 1998, the Catholic Church maintained 29,824 primary or secondary schools serving 9.6 million children, 6,754 secondary schools serving 1.9 million high school-aged students, and its universities and institutes of higher education had over 62,000 students enrolled.¹⁹ The latest statistics shows a significant increase in the number of educational institutions in Africa. According to the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2001*, as of the end of 2001, there were 10,738 Kindergarten schools, 30,009 primary schools, and 7,488 secondary schools. Students in Catholic higher institutions numbered 37,750; community welfare institutions numbered 14,144.

In the area of health care, the Catholic Church is visibly present by the number of hospitals, clinics, dispensaries, and other welfare institutions it runs. The 1994 African Synod records that although Catholics constitute only 14 percent of the population of Africa, Catholic health facilities make up 17 percent of the health-care institutions of the entire continent.²⁰ In 1998, there were 817 Catholic hospitals on the continent, 705 orphanages, and 504 homes for the elderly, chronically ill, invalids, and handicapped.²¹

Through the dual emphases on education and health care, the Church in Africa has helped tremendously in fostering development of the continent. The products of its schools and higher institutions teamed

19. Cited in Zalot, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, 54.

20. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 38.

21. Cited in Zalot, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, 54. The number of hospitals run by the Catholic Church in Africa is of course more in number than the figure we have here. But this is the statistics within reach as at the moment of writing. For instance in Uganda alone, there are twenty-seven hospitals, over twenty-three health care centers and over 6,000 health care workers and is second to the government as the largest healthcare provider in the country. The same is true of many African countries at least countries in the sub-Saharan Africa; cf. <http://www.ucmb.co.ug/data>.

up, and fought for, political independence from their various colonial governments. Education has offered employment opportunities to significant numbers of Africans. Many more are involved in private businesses and are contributing to African socio-economic development.

And through health care, the Church in Africa boosts the lifespan of Africans. In many African countries, Church-owned hospitals end up being the most reliable health care system in place for the people. With the outbreak of HIV/AIDS, the Church in Africa pioneered efforts to diagnose and control the spread of the disease. For instance, records show that the first serological test for the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS was carried out in St Francis Hospital, Nsambya, in Uganda on May 23, 1986.²² In Tanzania, Bugando Medical School, operated by the Catholic Church, trains thirty doctors a year—half of the newly qualified doctors in Tanzania.²³

The Church in Africa and the Search for Social Justice

A story is told of a certain village by the bank of a river, known for its generosity and hospitality. One day, a group of villagers saw dead bodies floating by the river. They raked up the bodies and buried them. As the phenomenon continued, the villagers selected some people for the purpose of burying dead bodies from their river. While they did what was commendable for burying the dead, they failed to find out the source of the evil omen; they did not think that what was killing their neighbor at the other end could eventually get to them. And so after a while, the enemy crossed over to the generous villagers and slaughtered them all.

If Africa is impoverished, it behooves the Church in Africa, like any other institution in Africa, to find out why—and to be ready to do what it takes to better the lives of her flock. Thus, we come to our second question: Does the Church in Africa do anything toward finding out why its people are poor? What does it do to liberate Africa from poverty?

First, individual bishops, dioceses, national, and regional conferences of bishops, as well as theologians and lay people, perceive their being

22. See Daniel Guisti, "Faithfulness to the Mission of the Church in Healthcare: Points of Method Emerging from Reflection over an Experience" (January 2005); cf. <http://www.ucmb.co.ug/data>. The Church in Africa still needs to do more in creating awareness of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. We shall say more on this as part of our recommendations on the way forward for the Church in Africa.

23. International Finance Corporation, *Health in Africa*.

leaders and members of the Church as implying their being salt of the earth—that is, those who by their witness ought to purify and perfect the society. As individuals, however, they diagnose the cause of African malaise differently.

- In his intervention at the 1994 Special Assembly for Africa, (the African Synod), bishop Joseph Ajomo of Nigeria observed that “as leaders of the Church in Africa, we must distance ourselves from unjust rulers, dictators, the corrupt civil authorities, and assume our rightful place as “the salt of the earth and light of the world” (Matt 5:13–14).²⁴
- For Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis of Liberia, the problem with Africa is traceable to the tendency to the cult of personality worship and intolerance. Archbishop Albert Obiefuna of Nigeria agrees—and notes with regret that, indeed, the African Christian with his exaggerated ethnicism finds it difficult to accept the truth that the Christian man or woman in India is much more a brother or sister than the non-Christian brother or sister in the natural family (Gal 5:10).²⁵
- Bishop Jean-Noel Diouf of Senegal sees inculturation and dialogue as the solution to the problem of Africa paralyzed by wars, famine, debt, unemployment, and poverty, decline of the educational system, AIDS and other endemic diseases, as well as the striking social crisis.
- For Bishop Zacchaeus Okoth, grassroot solutions should begin at the small Christian communities where inculturation, justice, peace, and communication through dialogue will receive greater attention.

Nevertheless, despite individual differences, various national and regional conferences of bishops of Africa²⁶ speak out as one through

24. Ajomo, “Interventions.”

25. Archbishop Albert Obiefuna, cited in Ajomo, “Interventions.”

26. There are nine regional conferences in Africa. These include: 1) Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), which includes Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zambia; 2) Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone Africa (AECAWA), which includes Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; 3) Inter Regional Meeting of Bishops of South Africa (IMBISA), includes Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Sao Tome, and Principe; 4) Association of Episcopal Conferences of Central Africa (ACEAC), which includes Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic

communiqués against government policies that infringe on the human dignity of Africans. An example was the 1992 pastoral letter *Living Our Faith*, from the Catholic Bishops of Malawi. This pastoral letter helped in the democratic process of Malawi, although after its publication a number of the bishops were arrested, questioned, detained, and repeatedly accused of sedition by the Malawian police.

African bishops call their nations to prayer²⁷ and offer useful suggestions on prevailing socio-economic situations.²⁸ For instance, the Cameroon Bishops Conference 1990 pastoral, *Les causes de la crise économique*, suggested an end to the Structural Adjustment Programme, cancellation of all foreign debts, and the creation of a new international marketplace based on solidarity and mutual interdependence.

The continent-wide body is the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), formed during the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) to enable the young African bishops speak with one voice on African issues and inaugurated as assembly of bishops on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's maiden visit to Africa in 1969.²⁹ It identified development and peace as the major areas Africa must tackle and achieve. Heavily influenced by the social teachings of the Church and the Synod of bishops' documents *Justice in the World* as well as *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the bishops, faced with the problems of Africa, emphasized the

Republic of Congo; 5) Association des Conference Episcopale Regionale de l'Afrique Centrale (ACERAC), which includes Congo, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea; 6) Conference Episcopale Regionale de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CERAO), which includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Togo, Cape Verde, and Guinea Bissau; 7) Conference Episcopale de Madagascar (CEM), which includes Madagascar, Seychelles, Mauritius, Comores, and Reunion; 8) Conference Episcopale Regionale du Nord d'Afrique (CERNA), which includes Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia; and 9) The Catholic Hierarchy of Egypt (AHCE), which includes Egypt and the Oriental Churches of North Africa; cf. Zalot, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, 186–87

27. Worthy of mention is the famous “Prayer for Nigeria in Distress,” composed by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria in 1993, when the presidential elections were annulled, followed by political upheaval, and national crises threatened the existence of the Nigerian nation.

28. Cited in Zalot, *ibid.*, 158.

29. Pope John Paul II traced the history of the formation of SECAM to the Second Vatican Council, where bishops sought to identify appropriate means of better sharing and making more effective their care for all the churches. Such moves gave rise to plans for suitable structures at the national, regional and continental levels. SECAM is an instance of such structures; cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 2–3.

connection between evangelization and human promotion. At the 1974 International Synod of Bishops in Rome, SECAM's report "Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelization" stresses integral salvation demanded by the Gospel. "Citing the fact that Christ himself is intimately concerned with the salvation of the entire person, the delegation holds that participating in development efforts and providing social services are not alien task[s] of the Church, but an integral element of the gospel message it is called to proclaim."³⁰ Thus their self-understanding, expressed in their mission statement, is:

"To promote its role as a sign and instrument of salvation and to build the Church as a Family of God in Africa": to preserve and foster communion, collaboration, and joint action among all the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and the Islands. Accordingly, the Symposium, through the Episcopal Conferences promotes: (i) Propagation of Faith: stressing on primary evangelization of those who have not yet received the message of Christ, i.e., in-depth and on-going evangelization of the peoples of Africa and the Islands. (ii) Human Development: i.e., the integral liberation of the human person, Good Governance and Justice and Peace issues. (iii) Ecumenism: i.e., the pursuit of fraternal relations and inter-religious dialogue with peoples of other faiths. (iv) Formation: i.e., the establishment of theological/pastoral institutions and research centers. (v) Consultation: i.e., on the major problems facing the Family of God in Africa and in the world as a whole.³¹

Through SECAM, the African bishops have spoken out with one voice against national and international injustices that keep Africa from attaining development. They have appealed to world leaders and international agencies for assistance to Africa's development efforts. They have also condemned the debt burden of Africa and the structural adjustment programs forced upon Africa by international financial institutions like IMF and the World Bank, which have robbed many African countries of welfare schemes and plunged them deeper into poverty that results

30. See Zalot, *Sub-Saharan Africa*, 147. Thus, as they did in the 1971 Synod of Bishops that produced *Justice in the World*, once more, in the 1974 Synod, they emphasized the importance of efforts to liberate people from oppression as the very demand of the prophetic function of the Church, and without which the Church will be rendered useless.

31. Cf. SECAM web site: <http://www.sceam-secam.org/identity.html>. Elochukwu Uzukwu acknowledged the role of SECAM in promoting evangelization as integral human promotion and its criticism of infringements of human rights; cf. Uzukwu, "Local Church," 6

in increased disease and illiteracy. As early as 1969, they emphasized the need for any assistance package to Africa to respect the dignity of the human person in Africa and not be attached to conditions that would negate African values. Applying the principle of subsidiarity, they insist on the right of African peoples to be involved in their own development.

SECAM does not just pass the buck of African underdevelopment on external factors. In its 1981 document *Justice and Evangelization in Africa*, the bishops identified corruption by Africans themselves as the major factor militating against economic development and called upon African Christians to realize that their faith calls them to authentic justice as part of the Christian ethic they profess. They are also aware of the place of authentic witness, starting with the Church itself. Thus, they state that in order to be truly a prophetic voice, the Church must be just within its own life. They urged the clergy to renounce flamboyant lifestyles that contradict the simplicity of the Gospel. The document also makes the following recommendations for justice in Africa:³²

- (i) education of the faithful in the social teachings of the Church;
- (ii) proper relationship between justice and human development: SECAM appealed to all Africans in public office to "carry out their responsibilities with justice and impartiality; it asks that in public spending priority be given to meeting the basic needs of the people . . . and that public money never be employed for extravagant expenses."
- (iii) on Politics: SECAM condemned "the rigging of elections, the suppression of freedom of speech, of free association, or of freedom of religion. It also condemns . . . the persecution, banning, or arbitrary imprisonment of those who profess political opinions that differ from the official position."

Globalization and the Church in Africa

No one doubts the benefits of globalization. Greater interconnectedness and interdependence, made possible by revolution in information

32. I am indebted to Josef D. Zalot's book *The Roman Catholic Church and Economic Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 150-54 (2002), for the citations from the SECAM document "Justice and Evangelization in Africa" under review.

technology; an improved standard of living, made possible by economic boom arising from free trade and the open market system; greater accountability and transparency, made possible by the demands and terms of trade; greater efficiency, made possible by competition bringing out the best in human creativity and ingenuity. The spread of democracy and more efforts at good governance, as well as respect for human rights, comes about at times from fear that maladministration affects trade and drives away investors wary of investment in unstable nations. This is because in globalization there is a connection between good governance, corruption-free regimes, provision of infrastructure, and economic advancement. The list can go on and on without end, depending on one's place in the global economy, good governance, and competitive spirit.³³ As Christopher Farrell notes: "A great transformation in world history is creating a new economic, social and political order: Communism's collapse and the embrace of freer markets by much of the developing world are driving huge increases in global commerce and international investment. The Information Revolution is forging strong links between nations, companies, and peoples. Improving education levels are creating a global middle class that shares 'similar concepts of citizenship, similar ideas about economic progress, and a similar picture of human rights.'"³⁴

33. While appraising globalization positively, we must not forget to ask the question for whom and to what extent. The rich industrialized countries can appraise globalization and rate its success highly as Martin Ravallion of the World Bank Policy Research did; see Martin Ravallion, "The Debate on Globalization, Poverty and Inequality: Why Measurement Matters" (*World Bank Policy Research: Working Paper 3038*, 1–26). Because the benefits have accrued to them and are still accruing to them and may continue to accrue to them, going by the structure of economic globalization today that creates economic inequality. However, alongside this phenomenal affluence arising from globalization there is the increasing poverty of the world's poor, whose standard of living keeps on falling; who are exposed to violence, and who suffer dehumanizing indignities as a result of the affluence created by globalization to the few rich industrialized nations; cf. UNDP 1998 Report, 49. Simeon O. Ilesanmi's observation buttresses this fact: "Contrary to the jubilant declaration in certain international financial circles that the embrace of market-based development and great advances in the global circulation of goods, capital, and ideas are creating wealth and bringing new opportunities (World Bank 1995, 1), globalization has actually exposed billions of people to monumental risks. It has created an unjust condition of radical inequality and penury that is extreme, persistent, pervasive, and yet, avoidable. Africa is most overburdened by this condition because of the manner in which it is integrated into the global economy. By the terms of its integration, Africa is conditioned to never-ending impoverishment." Ilesanmi, "Leave No Poor Behind," 78.

34. Farrell, "Triple Revolution," 195.

However, as the system of globalization fosters homogeneity among people, there is the tendency for the dominant groups to swallow the minority; this inevitably brings about loss of cultural identity and, hence, loss of meaning and value, often resulting in chaos and confusion. And this is the major tension in globalization: the tension between culture (tradition) and development or civilization, between modern life and traditional values. The dichotomy between the two plays itself out in the open society in the tension between the individual ethics of life and communal norm; the secular and the religious, the sacred and the profane, religious extremism and tolerance. The result has at various times been either violence or reconciliation. Thus, the challenge of globalization remains keeping the two in a balance, as Thomas Friedman aptly observes:

The challenge in this era of globalization—for countries and individuals—is to find a healthy balance between preserving a sense of identity, home and community and doing what it takes to survive within the globalization system. Any society that wants to thrive economically today must constantly be trying to build a better Lexus and driving it out into the world. But no one should have any illusions that merely participating in this global economy will make a society healthy. If that participation comes at the price of a country's identity, if individuals feel their olive tree roots crushed, or washed out, by this global system, those olive tree roots will rebel. They will rise up and strangle the process. Therefore, the survival of globalization as a system will depend, in part, on how well all of us strike this balance.³⁵

I quote Thomas Friedman extensively, not because I adopt his market-oriented profit-making capitalistic brand of globalization that must don the "golden straitjacket," irrespective of its adverse effects on the poor, weak, and infirm. Nor do I support the reform measures of the international financial institutions that have taken over governance and dictate the economic policy in many developing countries including Africa; but, rather, to show the tension in the world today sharpened by the new system of globalization. As we noted earlier, African poverty and increasing incidence of disease, including HIV/AIDS, results partly from the withdrawal of social welfare packages by African governments adhering strictly to the "golden straitjacket" of economic globalization.

35. Friedman, *Lexus*, 42.

It is to this globalization—political-social-economic imperialism and tendencies to “universal” civilization, or monoculture—that the Church in Africa must respond. The Industrial Revolution left Africa behind because she was enslaved during the period; her labor provided the raw materials for the growth of the industries. Today, if care is not taken, the revolution in information technology might overtake Africa and again leave her behind, something that enduring poverty in Africa inadvertently facilitates (how many children in Africa today know how to use a computer?).

As a consequence, Africa in the future, just as now, may not be able to tell her own stories; she may not have control of mass media. She may well be relegated to merely an appendage in the global communications machine, resurfacing on the world stage only when tribal conflicts and wars are flashed on screen, therefore continuing to portray how savage she and her people are to a civilized world.

The unpredictable power supply in some African countries and its complete absence in others, as well as absence of and/or decaying social infrastructures, are also worrisome aspects of considering the future of Africa in the new era of globalization. The Fathers of the Special Assembly for Africa (1994) lamented:

The developing nations, instead of becoming autonomous nations concerned with their own progress toward a just sharing in the goods and services meant for all, become parts of a machine, cogs on a gigantic wheel. This is often true also in the field of social communications which, being run by centers mostly in the northern hemisphere, do not always give due consideration to the priorities and problems of such countries or respect their cultural make-up. They frequently impose a distorted vision of life and of man, and thus fail to respond to the demands of true development.³⁶

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, African cultural values appears to be most seriously hit in the system of globalization. Globalization has made migration easier; a quest for a better standard of living has made emigration almost a necessity for Africans. This has brought lots of strain on marriage, family, and Christian faith, with increasing rates of divorce, domestic violence, and abandonment of the Faith in the quest for basic survival in foreign lands.

36. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 52.

Furthermore, the present wave of secularization with its tendencies to materialism further distorts African cultural values, thereby weakening its ability to integrate the dialectics of African communities. If one may ask, where is our sense of fellowship when we are divided ethnically and tribally? Where is honesty and selflessness amidst so much lying, greed, and corruption? What have we done with transparency and accountability in the face of grandiose worship of money? What has happened to African sense of chastity as she hawks her daughters and children to prostitution overseas? The situation is precarious: Africa struggles with the problem of cultural identity arising from the various heritages she has inherited from her traditional culture, Christian life, and Islamic religion.

The Imperative of Culture

Globalization, therefore, makes attention to culture an imperative. And the Church in Africa cannot ignore this. Actually, the first African Synod (1994) made inculturation its central theme, in order to harmonize Christian faith and culture. An inculturated Christian faith becomes meaningful to the African and pays attention to the various conditions of the African peoples—no longer foreign, but native to the African life. Such Christianity allows Africans to be who they are and equips them to weave together the variables of the globalized world of today. Only an inculturated Christian faith will give the African the spirituality for liberation—for the reconciliation, justice, and peace much needed for development in Africa. Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Malawi, offered inculturation as a challenge to the Church in Africa: “I put before you today a challenge—a challenge to reject a way of living which does not correspond to the best of your traditions and your Christian faith. Many people in Africa look beyond Africa for the so-called ‘freedom of the modern way of life.’ Today, I urge you to look inside yourselves. Look to the riches of your own traditions, look to the Faith which we are celebrating in this assembly. Here, you will find genuine freedom—here, you will find Christ, who will lead you to the truth.”³⁷

But thus far, inculturation has been liturgical only, with the Eucharist celebrated in various native languages of Africa; in the use of local instruments used in sacred music; and in liturgical vestments sewn using

37. *Ibid.*, 48.

African textile materials. In other areas of life, attempts at inculturation have been heavy on words and light on action. While attempts are being made to study the African traditional religion, the religion from which most conversions to Christianity are made and the custodian of African culture,³⁸ the process of inculturating the Christian faith has been rather too slow. Cultural problems are still handled as they were by the missionaries over a century ago. Some rich cultural values and practices are condemned outright, without proper investigation of them. Members of the clergy set up ad hoc committees to adjudicate cultural issues they do not understand. Peculiar African perspectives that deal with the spirit world—ancestral veneration, witchcraft, and water spirit cult phenomena—are either swept under carpet as if they do not exist or are treated as neurotic or schizophrenic, in a Eurocentric manner.

Cultural institutions like masquerading, marriage, and title taking are not treated any differently. Masquerading is banned as an evil cult; indigenous cultural titles are condemned as tainted with evil due to certain sacrifices associated with them; and some marriages, contracted validly in the customs and traditions of the people, are declared invalid. Little wonder that today many people, especially among the educated elites, discard Christianity, while a good number mix their faith with their traditional religious beliefs and practices. The gap between theory and practice of inculturation results from concentrating on theological principles, justifying inculturation that swallows up the practice itself. Augustine Onyeneke rightly notes: "Much work on inculturation, mainly by theologians concentrating on theological principles, showing how desirable and how feasible the movement ought to be, but hardly descending to practical ways and examples of inculturation in concrete life."³⁹

38. In a letter of March 25, 1988, mandating the Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar to include the study of African traditional religion in the seminary curriculum, the then President of the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions, Francis Cardinal Arinze, cited six of these cultural values to include: "sense of the sacred, respect for life, sense of community, family, spiritual vision of life, authority as sacred, and symbolism in religious worship."

39. Onyeneke, *African Traditional Institutions*, 18. Two other factors militating against inculturation of Christian faith in Africa are the theological divide between inculturation theology and liberation theology; and the financial dependence of the Church in Africa to the Western Church. On account of the former, there is mutual suspicion among theologians in the various camps in Africa. Since he who plays the piper as the saying goes, dictates the tune, the Church in Africa leaders are afraid of implementing

The anomalies in the life of African people thought to uphold rich cultural values is a clarion call on the Church in Africa to integrate African cultural and religious values—that in themselves are in consonance with the Gospel values of love, justice, and peace—into Christian faith. What this means in the search for social justice and in the life of the Church as the salt of the earth is that, as people begin to accept and reconcile their faith with their culture, Christian faith and love can take root in the whole life of the people.

Christian faith could thus become a transforming force through which people can overcome the otherworldly spirituality that prevents the people in large part from seeing social injustice as something they should fight to change. This could go a long way toward sensitizing people to the importance of overcoming poverty, fighting the culture of corruption, and holding their leaders accountable for use of the nation's resources. Thus, inculturation becomes a powerful factor in the struggle for justice. As Peter Schineller observed:

Since inculturation is inevitably linked with the struggle for justice, it will at times be a challenge to the ruling powers. Inculturation grapples with the issue of the religious culture of people in the face of the Christian faith, as well as the major questions of poverty, injustice, marginalization in our world . . . Much resistance will come to a prophetic voice when it addresses these issues and tries to inculturate Christian faith in a sinful, often unjust world. Persecution and rejection are marks of the true Church, the Church that is trying to inculturate gospel values of justice and peace in a world that is often unjust and violent.⁴⁰

It ought to be emphasized, then, that the issue of social justice is a great challenge confronting the Church in Africa. She can no longer tackle it merely by exhortatory words, addresses, and communiqués. The socio-economic, historical, and political landscape of Africa demands more prophetic roles in terms of open denunciation, education, and mobilization of the people to reject, to fight, and to uproot unjust structures that oppress, marginalize, impoverish, and dehumanize African peoples. There will be no African Church if there are no Africans.

inculturation to the full for fear of losing the financial assistance from Rome and other sister Churches in the West.

40. Schineller, "Inculturation," 56.

The Church in Africa also cannot exist independent of the context and life situations of Africans. Therefore, improving the lot of Africans must be one of the constitutive dimensions of the ministry of the Church in Africa. So inculturation and liberation must go hand-in-hand if inculturation is to be put into practice. As Jean-Marc Ela aptly notes:

A Church that seeks to say something to today's African cannot content itself with an authentically African liturgy, catechetics, and theology. The modes of expression of the Faith have sense and meaning only if the Church is deeply involved in the battles being waged by human beings against conditions that stifle their human liberty. The participation of the Church in these battles, then, becomes the necessary condition for any liturgy, any catechesis, any theology in Africa. It is in the vital experience of the communities and of their striving for life, liberty, and justice, that any reference to Jesus and his mission—a mission of the liberation of the oppressed—will find genuine sense and meaning.⁴¹

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing discourse, we recommend the following toward the Roman Catholic Church being the salt of the earth.

1. The Church must give authentic witness aimed at living the gospel values, so as to satisfy the thirst for God by the people of God, its body of Christ. In this regard, the lifestyle of the clergy must reflect the condition of the people. Clergy need to be rigorous in self-examination to ensure that, while they are entitled to maintenance, their compensation should not be out of line with the conditions of the people to whom they minister.

2. Training the laity as the agents of evangelization is important. Through homilies, symposia, conferences, seminars, etc., the laity can learn how to step up to their civic responsibilities. Bible study and fellowship sodalities etc. should emphasize social analysis. In this way, faith and action is integrated.

3. HIV/AIDS is ravaging Africa and is the number-one weapon of mass destruction militating against any development effort, as it kills experts and skilled manpower and drains resources. The Church in Africa should do more than it does now to combat the disease. She should create

41. Ela, *African Cry*, 132.

awareness by talking about the disease publicly, discussing its causes in order to remove the stigma, and helping in the care of the afflicted.

4. As a religion, the Church in Africa must come to grips with the reality of globalization and be able to understand its internal dynamics, especially economic globalization. The socio-economic condition of African today was created as a consequence of (among other factors) the Breton Wood agreement. It should be able to speak out in clear condemnation of structural adjustment programs without a human face that keep many African peoples perpetually poor and malnourished. Christians and other religionists perpetuate capital outflow from the continent. She must not allow herself to be caught up in sharing in the booty of the few African technocrats who benefit from a system that holds other Africans down in poverty and want. If she does, she will be caged.

She has to understand the dynamics of market-oriented economy before involving herself in it. She must not become an agent that corrodes the cultural traditions of Africa in preference for Eurocentric culture masquerading as Christianity. Therefore, she must open her eyes to the effects of globalization and be ready, through Christian tradition, to preserve the cultural values of African peoples.

5. In a pluralistic society like many countries of Africa, with multiple heritages, the Church in Africa must pay close attention to dialogue and be able to unite with other religions to a common cause for the good of the continent. The divide-and-rule attitude that pits the Church in Africa against other religions does not help in bettering the socio-economic life of the people. It only gives the technocrats opportunity to distract the people by playing religious politics while looting the treasury and disregarding infrastructural development.

6. The African Church does not seem to have caught on to aspects of ecological devastation, in spite of erosion and other disasters like drought, famine arising from insufficient rain, etc. At times, she embarks on development projects without due regard to the environment. I have not come across any document from any of the regional bodies on ecology or on the need for an ecological spirituality.