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The African social question: A challenge to the African church[1] in light of the two synods on Africa

ABSTRACT

The First Synod of Catholic Bishops on Africa took place in April 1994 in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. That horrendous fratricide has left a dark spot in the history of Catholicism in Africa where "the blood of tribalism is thicker than the water of baptism". The Second Synod on Africa, held in October 2009, had as its theme: "The Church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice and peace". Pope Benedict XVI issued a post-synodal exhortation, entitled Africae Munus. In one article, the pope writes: "Reconciliation is a way of life and mission of the Church" (Africae Munus no. 34). This article is set against that background to examine the mission and the role which the Catholic Church can play in Africa with regard to the African social question that encompasses all other perennial issues on the continent. Those other issues include ethnicity, religious and cultural hatred, as well as incessant conflicts that lead to the loss of lives and retardation in development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pope Pius IX (1846-1878), in convoking the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), had intended the Council, among other reasons,

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1 In this instance, African Church means the Catholic Church in Africa. The same Church in Africa is referred to as the Local Church in relation to the Universal Catholic Church.

> to take up in this new age the ancient problems of the relations of
> Church and State and provide appropriate guidance, so as to promote
> peace and prosperity in the national life everywhere (Hanson 1987:34).

All the churches that now collectively constitute the Catholic Church in Africa, to say the least, were at the planting stage when Pius IX convoked that Council in the second half of the 19th century.

Quite curiously, those "ancient problems" were considered anew at the first and second synods on Africa in 1994 and 2009, respectively. As times and contexts do change, the synod fathers examined these not through the purview of Europe of the 19th century, but in light of the realities and exigencies of the African continent of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. For instance, the *lineamenta* document, in preparation for the first synod, posed the following question:

> Describe the vital link between the Church's mission of evangelisation
> and action on behalf of human promotion, justice and peace. What
> programmes of formation exist in this regard, particularly towards
> the lay Faithful's active participation in civil life and politics (Synodus
> Episcoporum 1990:no. 63).

Africa is a diverse and complex continent with geographical and cultural differences as well as different stages of political and economic development. Similarly, the Catholic Church on the continent reflects, in so many ways, the diversities and complexities of the continent both in its responsibility towards the social question and the apparent lack of commitment in some instances. The African Church is a small part of a bigger Catholic Church. By its long diplomatic tradition on the world stage, the Church does not engage in diplomatic negotiations on the basis of purely political interests. It rather does so primarily on the basis of its desire to secure a domain in the public space for its mission of evangelisation. Any research on the interventions of the Catholic Church in Africa must be done through that purview, although those interventions may be variegated and multiform, and certainly vary from country to country on account of different histories and stages of development.

Despite the variegations of interventions based on local realities and the issues in question, certain similarities can still be deciphered through the collective identity of the local church and through the instrumentality of the social teachings of the Church. Some similarities can also be discerned through a number of common features, themes and experiences that are embedded in the African reality and equally define the same reality across the board within the sub-Saharan regions of the continent. Long before the convocation of the two synods on Africa, Pope Paul VI, in his homily on 31 July 1969 at the closing Mass for the First Plenary Assembly of SECAM (Symposium

of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) in Kampala, noted perceptively that the African Church was "confronted with an immense and original undertaking" with regard to the transformation and development of the continent. Hence, in view of that undertaking, the pontiff charged the African bishops, as leaders of their local churches, to provide credible leadership in order to "help Africa towards development, towards concord, towards peace" (cited in Sangu 1974:37).

While not pretending to cover the length and breadth of Africa, this article will endeavour to examine the place of the Catholic Church in the project of nation-building in sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, it will seek to insert the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church on the continent through the prisms of the two synods on Africa. This will be done with a special focus on the areas of social activism in relation to the African social question. Finally, the article will attempt to anchor any possible role of the Church, in relation to the social question, on African Christian humanism and consider some possible challenges.

2.   THE AFRICAN SOCIAL QUESTION

The great African theologian, Jean-Marc Éla, once recalled in one of his writings the question posed to him by a woman in Yaoundé. The context of that encounter between Éla and the woman was the devaluation of the CFA francs that took place on 12 January 1994. The devaluation was imposed by France and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on francophone countries in Africa that use the CFA as their legal tender. In view of the economic hardships that ensued after the devaluation, the woman in question asked Éla: "You want to go to Rome? What did the Pope say when they devalued the CFA franc?" And in his response, Éla (1996:133) said to the woman, "Ask him". The woman expected that the pope should have said something about the economic plights of his flock in Africa. Or, perhaps, the bishops of those countries ought to have sent a message to that effect, in order to acknowledge the pains caused by that monetary policy, subscribed to by their respective governments. Given the overall hardships that Africans endured between the late 1980s and the 1990s on account of the structural adjustment programmes imposed on many African economies by the IMF and the World Bank, the same Éla (1996:133) interpreted the acronyms of IMF to mean: IMPERIALISM, MISERY and FAMINE.

The social question in Africa is vast and all-encompassing. It includes various realities that affect Africans in their daily lives from politics to economics, culture and religion, as well as issues that border on conflicts and ethnicity, justice and peace. In simple terms, the social question refers

to the totality of the well-being and development of the African person in his/ her natural habitat, which is the African ambience, especially in the sub-Saharan part of the continent. In that regard, there is no shortage of literature to depict how Africans and their history of civilisation have been enslaved by almost every foreign culture from outside the continent. As a result, it is argued that Africans have continuously borne the brunt of enslavement with devastating consequences such as the shunning of their material, artistic and spiritual resources, as well as their environment so that the source of their creativity, awareness and dignity have become wounded and, to some degree, even paralysed! Such was the view expressed at the Abidjan Colloquium on "Black Civilization and the Catholic Church" that took place from 12 to 17 September 1977. It was organised by the Society of African Culture (Présence Africaine 1977:6).

In its complexity, the African reality encapsulated in the continental social question is much more nuanced than as it was depicted by participants at the Abidjan Colloquium. There was no better person than Kofi Annan, the late Ghanaian international statesman and former Secretary General of the United Nations, who was able to unpack the intricate and constitutive phenomenon called "the African social question". The key to that unlocking is found in Annan's 1998 special report to the UN General Assembly and the Security Council, entitled "The causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa". In the analysis of Annan, the social question in relation to the reality of African recent past, was one marked by the absence of favourable conditions for peace and sustainable development through the failure of African leaders to avert colossal human tragedies, which, in turn, impeded any meaningful promotion of human security on the continent (Annan 1998:3).

Annan did not limit his analysis to the social question in Africa alone. He went beyond it and connected the well-being and security of Africans to those of the world at large. Annan argued that the prevention of conflicts in Africa and the promotion of the human development of Africans were indissolubly connected with the defence of humanity itself. In that context, he provided the statistics to indicate that over 30 wars were fought in Africa between 1970 and 1998. Equally distressing was the fact that, as at 1996, 14 out of the 54 countries in Africa were at war. The offshoots of those wars were casualties that accounted for over half of all war-related deaths worldwide. There is no gain in saying the obvious. Such tragedies seriously undermined any significant efforts for long-term stability, prosperity, and peace, all of which are important and constitutive elements of the African social question. Inherent in the social question are also concerns about the accountability of leaders, transparency, checks and balances, adherence to the rule of law, peaceful

means of leadership change or replacement and, most importantly, respect for the human rights of Africans (Annan 1998:3-4). The absence of all those, on a large scale across the continent, sadly constitutes the bane of Africa's inability to adequately address the social question. Pope Benedict XVI (2008) wisely articulated this phenomenon in his address to the United Nations on 18 April 2008:

> The promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups and for increasing security. Indeed, the victims of hardship and despair, whose human dignity is violated with impunity, become easy prey to the call to violence, and they can become violators of peace.

3.   THE CHURCH AND THE AFRICAN SOCIAL QUESTION

It is very reassuring to read in the final message of the Fathers of the second synod on Africa who admitted, with unusual frankness, that, although the continent is richly endowed, regrettably, Africa remains buckled under the strains of "poverty, misery, wars and conflicts, crisis and chaos" (Catholic Bishops of Africa 2009: Final message no 5). The causes of such endemic poverty and misery were blamed on the leaders of Africa with the collusion of some external forces and interests. The sincerity of their admission extended to the realisation that African problems and hardships

> are very rarely caused by natural disasters. They are largely due to human decisions and activities by people who have no regard for the common good and this often through a tragic complicity and criminal conspiracy of local leaders and foreign interests (Catholic Bishops of Africa 2009: Final Message no. 5).

The late eminent Nigerian political scientist, Claude Ake, would have been very pleased with the bishops, were he alive in 2009. It was his basic contention that development had always eluded Africa not so much for the lack or paucity of ideas, but simply because development

> was never really on the agenda in the first place [on the ground that] political conditions in Africa are the greatest impediment to development (Ake 1996:1).

Difficult as it may be to acknowledge, the truth remains, "as long as politics is seen as the path to wealth, then Africa is on a downward path" (Whelan & Thomas 2005:3). This state of affairs is prolonged through the rat-race style of politics that is rife in many parts of Africa, where the constant struggle to hold

on to power at all costs absorbs everything. In the process, development is marginalised, and the problems of the social question are left unattended. On that basis, Ake concluded that development in Africa has remained vague or a hollow ideology. It is only used as a mantra by African politicians to maintain a grip on power for the domination of the populace and for the interest of a small political elite (Ake 1996:7-8). This helps explain why attempts at devolution of power from highly centralised and personalised forms of government are very often resisted. Such devolution of power might have helped address the persistent problem of imbalance and possibly instil institutional mechanisms to guarantee transparency and accountability (Mudida 2009:126). As has been the experience of many countries on the continent, the near-absence of effective institutional mechanisms has made it possible for the politics of "winner-takes-all" to flourish alongside corruption that "has critically hobbled and skewed Africa's development" (Annan 1998:15). The painful collective experience since the dawn of independence on the continent has taught Africans one bitter lesson. And it is this: Where there are no genuine democratic institutions to restrain the excesses of the big man, fixed terms of office are not respected, or they are simply ignored at best, while other contending interests with no veritable avenues for seeking redress, in most cases, take up arms to settle their differences (Annan 1998:4).

The Church in Africa is inescapably included in the African social question. This is underpinned by the obvious truth that the Church does exist in history and within the concrete realities of its faithful. It does mean that the local Church that is found in Africa is, by extension, a "Church of the poor", because Africa remains a poor continent on many fronts. There are many projections and estimates that portray Africa as a young continent whose youthful populations, regrettably, are hampered by limited opportunities. To buttress this point, the 2012 report on *African Economic Outlook*, prepared for the African Development Bank (ADB), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), puts the population of African young people, aged between 15 years and 24 years, to be roughly 200 million. Sadly and unfortunately, the same young people in that age bracket currently account for approximately 60 per cent of unemployment in Africa (cited in Ighobor 2013). There are already demographic pressures and issues of mass migration of young people particularly from western, eastern, and central parts of Africa. They dare the devil in making dangerous and tortuous journeys through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea *en route* to Europe for better opportunities.

There is also another prediction to indicate that the overall African population may more than double by 2050 to roughly 2.4 billion people (Brooks 2017:188). Logically, this should put pressure on all African stakeholders to

accelerate development, in order to march the projected population increase. As Brooks candidly points out in his research on the over-orchestrated rise in African GDP, the continent's prevalent annual average GDP growth of $1,570 is abysmally insufficient to keep pace with the growing African population. Although Africa may be classified as the tenth economy in the world, however, in the estimation of Brooks (2017:188),

> [i]f Africa's GDP were to continue to grow at around a net 1.5 per cent per year it would take 125 years to reach the world's 2015 average income.

Practically, this means that Africans may wait till the year 2255 to reach parity with the current annual average income in the United States of America (Brooks 2017:188). Unsurprisingly, the present circumstantial realities in Africa impact negatively on the local Church in Africa and equally impede her own potentials, because the Church is not a disinterested spectator, but a concerned stakeholder in the African social question. It is in this sense that the words of Pope Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia, in reference to the second synod and its theme, has many implications for the local church and her leaders (Benedict XVI 2009: n.p.):

> The task of Bishops was to transform theology into pastoral care, namely into a very concrete pastoral ministry in which the great perspectives found in sacred Scripture and Tradition find application in the activity of Bishops and priests in specific times and places. … In fact, the very practical question that Pastors constantly have to face is precisely this: how can we be realistic and practical without claiming a political competence that does not belong to us? … The theme of the Synod designated three great words which are basic to theological and social responsibility: reconciliation, justice, peace. Every society needs acts of reconciliation in order to enjoy peace. These acts are a prerequisite of a good political order, but they cannot be achieved by politics alone.

4.   TWO COMPLEMENTARY SYNODS

It is generally believed that the Catholic Church in Africa came of age in the post-Vatican II period, that is from 1965 to the convocation of the First African Synod in 1994. In fact, as once explained by Cardinal Francis Arinze, with the exception of Angola and the then Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), the vast majority of African countries south of the Sahara had not yet celebrated their centenary of evangelisation when Pope Paul VI became the first pope to visit Africa in 1969 (Arinze 2015:30). The second half of the 20th century belonged to Africa in terms of massive conversion to Christianity and

the preponderance in the number of African indigenous clergy and religious. Seventeen years after Paul VI's visit to Uganda, it became possible to speak of an "Africanised hierarchy" of the Church in Africa because, as at 31 December 1986, of the 481 bishops in Africa at the time, 348 bishops were Africans. By 2001, the number of native bishops stood at 474 in comparison to 142 bishops of non-African origin (Ngulu 2015:26-27). In the same spectrum, it is pertinent to recall that the structures of the 1974 synod of bishops in Rome raised the status of the African Church in relation to other churches in the world. Cardinal Paul Zoungrana of Ouagadougou was one of the papal delegates who presided at that synod and Bishop James D. Sangu of Mbeya was one of the synod's *relatores* (Onaiyekan 2015:106).

Of equal significance is the projection that a quarter of the world's Catholics will come from Africa by the year 2030 (Ngulu 2015:29). In this regard is the importance of the recent data released on 25 March 2020 by the Pontifical Office of Ecclesial Statistics. The data, for the period of five years from 2013 to 2018 as covered by the report, indicated that the total number of Catholics worldwide hovered at approximately over 1.3 billion. Of this number, a substantial increase took place in the Oceania and Africa. In particular, the number of African Catholics was put at 19.4 per cent of the total population of Africa. And while the number of priests on a global average appeared stagnant, Africa offered hope in that direction with an increase of 14.3 per cent in the number of new priests on the continent. It also offered hope to the universal Church with 15.6 per cent in the number of its seminarians in preparation for the priesthood. The increase in the number of African priests was acknowledged thus in the 2020 Vatican Yearbook:

> Africa, with a positive variation of 15.6%, confirms that it is the geographical area with the greatest potential to cover the needs of pastoral services (cited in Esteves 2020).

In light of the foregoing, it becomes possible to locate the rudder to navigate through the contours around the coming of age of the Church in Africa, and within which the two synods must also be inserted. As would be expected, the historical backgrounds of the two synods on Africa have received extensive research (Onwubiko 1994; Mveng 1996:20-31; Turkson 2010).[2] All that is possible, in this instance, is a brief sketch. The idea of "an African synod" of some sort predated even the Second Vatican Council, going as far back as 1957. The African Synod held in Rome from 10 April to 8 May 1994 was rather the climax of a very long process. It was the fruit of various efforts and attempts to fashion out an "African Christianity". For the purpose of emphasis, suffice

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2   *Hekima Review* devoted an edition on the second synod. See *Hekima Review* 41 (December 2009).

it to note that the participants at the Abidjan Colloquium in 1977 categorically insisted that the "time of holding a genuine Council of the African Catholic Church in Africa has now become indispensable" (Présence Africaine 1977:6). The idea was cast against the background of the realisation that Africa was not adequately represented at Vatican II. This is not surprising, since many of the pioneer African bishops at the time were either young or served as auxiliary bishops, a position that did not add much to their profiles. Hence, the idea was floated that an "African synod" was of paramount importance, in order to deal with issues that were of interest and concern to Africa, the nascent local church and its people. Its theme of evangelisation was considered under five broad headings: proclamation; inculturation; dialogue; justice and peace, and social communication (Onaiyekan 2015:107).

If the idea and initiative for the first synod came from below, conversely, the initiative for the second synod came from above. Pope John Paul II, in an audience granted on 13 November 2004 to a group of bishops who represented SECAM and the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (abbreviated with its Latin initials CCEE), announced his intention to convoke a second synod on Africa. That announcement was historical, because it was made on the 1650th anniversary of the birth of St Augustine of Hippo (Turkson 2010). It was judged necessary and opportune to build on the experiences of the bishops that were garnered at the first synod. And, more importantly, those experiences were to be examined through the lens of the reality that many bishops on the continent had had to deal with the hazards of wars and conflicts that included the challenges of refugees, fratricide, painstaking negotiations for peace, and conflict resolutions. The experiences of the bishops and their individual testimonies were to be inserted in the overall optic of other continental challenges and issues relating to justice, reconciliation and good governance, since many were of the opinion that democracy and good governance had eluded Africa from 1994, when the bishops first met in Rome (Onaiyekan 2015:108). The second synod was definitively convoked by Pope Benedict XVI on 22 June 2005 and took place in Rome from 4 to 25 October 2009.

Both synods took place during the period that is now recognised as the fourth and fifth phases of the Church in Africa and the history of Catholic evangelisation on the continent. Apart from the challenges of rooting the local churches in their local environments, one uphill task for the Church in Africa is how to help the different component Christian communities be visible witnesses of communion, fraternity, solidarity, and peace (Oborji 2013:19-20). The Rwandan experience remains a stark reminder that, while churches may be full on Sundays and on other days of solemnity, the human heart needs a constant conversion. Pope John II was absolutely right to single out "human

hearts", wounded as they are, to be "the ultimate hiding places" for everything that destabilises human harmony and equilibrium (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* no. 2). The UN's *2020 Happiness Index* seems to confirm the assertion of the saintly pope. It listed Rwanda alongside South Sudan, Zimbabwe, and the Central Africa Republic (CAR) to top the list of the unhappiest countries in the world. This is not surprising at all, because some of the measuring criteria were somewhat similar to those considered in this article as the constitutive elements of the African social question: less corruption, a sense of belonging, trust of fellow citizens, and faith in civil institutions (Helliwell *et al.* 2020). In the case of Rwanda, with Paul Kagame as the bully dictator, who has been president since the end of the Rwandan civil war, it is hard to imagine how Rwandans can possibly be happy where any dissenting voice is mercilessly crushed with impunity. It is also interesting to note that, with the exception of South Sudan, the other listed countries are places with significant percentages of Catholics among the population.

As two synods in mutual complementarity that have marked the recent history of the Catholic Church in Africa, the first synod offered the local church an opportunity for auto-definition and auto-awareness of its mission of evangelisation on the continent. Similarly, the second synod provided avenues and means for auto-critical examination so as to fashion out concrete terms, scopes and strategies to effectively carry out the evangelising mission (Oborji 2013:19-21). This explains the Church's preoccupations with and concerns about reconciliation and the promotion of peace in contemporary Africa. According to Oborji, if the first synod was more about inculturation, the second synod essentially concerned itself with social issues of justice and peace. Collectively, both synods give an insight into the prospects and challenges for the African Church in contemporary African societies. The challenges basically have to do with strengthening and deepening a harmonious and peaceful coexistence among the different tribes and ethnic groups that fecundate Africa. Those diverse tribes and ethnic groups equally form parts of the local churches and the whole of sub-Saharan Africa (Oborji 2013:19-21).

5.   AFRICAN CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

In conciliar history, a synod or council is understood as a process, because, like a seed, it is planted, it germinates and finally, it bears fruit(s). Technically, as explicated by Ankinwale (2008:32), the conciliar process and its reception involve three stages, namely "retrieval of the synodal teaching, its interpretation, and its application by way of implementation of its decisions". In addition to the *Propositions* made by the synodal fathers, the final document of the first synod is *Ecclesia in Africa*, signed by John Paul II in Cameroon on 14 September 1995, whereas *Africae Munus*, the final document of the second

synod, was signed by Benedict XVI in Benin Republic on 19 November 2011. How each local church retrieves, interprets, and implements the two synods varies from country to country and even from diocese to diocese. And so does the role that the Church is expected to play in any given society. The basic point of departure should ideally be the understanding that the well-being of the individual ought to be the object and concern of any law, understood in classical scholastic tradition as the product of reason. In the African context, the centrality of the African person, as found in the synod documents, is the interpretative key to both synods and may be called "African Christian humanism" (Ankinwale 2008). For that reason, it becomes imperative for the Church in Africa to go beyond the rhetoric of "inculturation", in order to launch deep into the real phase of the mission of liberation in which the Gospel may enliven the concrete lives of both African men and women. As explained by Kaggwa (2005:193), this entails liberation from political, social, and economic oppressions to which Africans are everywhere subjected on the continent.

However, as cautioned by Cardinal Peter Turkson, the two synods risk being misinterpreted if their overall themes are not understood as being primarily theological and pastoral in orientation. Although they have political implications, they must never be misconstrued as political manifestoes (Turkson 2010). Nonetheless, as described by Paul VI in his *motu proprio*, *Apostolica Sollicitudo* of 15 September 1965, every synod is a kind of "laboratory of communion" (emphasis by Onaiyekan 2015:105). It is never a communion in the abstract sense. On the contrary, it is a real and historical communion. That historicity helps explain the presences of some unseen or not very visible guests and events in *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*. Those unseen guests, in turn, shed light on those two documents and their relevance to the wider African reality and to the African social question as well as their challenges.

The first of those unseen guests is that the synod of 1994 was held four years after the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, who became, as it were, the new face of Africa in the 1990s. Another invisible guest was the dreadful Rwandan genocide. It was there to shame everyone, because, as has been estimated, the greatest number of killings between 6 April and the end of July 1994 took place in Rwanda's churches or on church premises, as people who sought refuge in those places were murdered in cold blood. Until 1994, Rwanda was considered a success story from the point of view of Christian evangelisation. Of the population, roughly 62 per cent were Catholics, 18 per cent were Protestants, and 8.6 per cent were Seventh Day Adventists. The entire population was judged Christian at 90 per cent (Safari 2010:874-5). What the psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham wrote about trauma in family history

can be safely applied to the Rwandan case: "What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (cited in Sands 2016:xxv).

Another invisible guest at the table of the first synod was the shadow of the Cold War that was just ending in the early 1990s and brought about a unipolar world. The immediate effect of its demise in Africa was that undemocratic and oppressive regimes, previously supported and financed by the Western powers, were suddenly left to fend for themselves when confronted by unrests and conflicts. Similarly, the 1992 epochal pastoral letter by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Malawi acted as a catalyst for the spiral of unrests and events that ended the life-term presidency of Hastings Kamuzu Banda in 1994. In its extreme simplicity, that pastoral letter was articulated and written with the plights of the common people in mind. It was delivered as a "hidden script" that represented a critique of Banda and the ruling elite. The "hidden script" was spoken behind the back of the oppressors of Malawians. To the chagrin of Banda's oppressive government, as one of the bishops once said: "I did not write the letter, it was written a long time ago on the hearts of our people" (Mijoga 1996-1997:57). The bishops only articulated and gave voice to what everybody already knew but which no one dared to voice out (Mijoga 1996-1997:60). Instructively, the bishops' springboard for their pastoral was a quotation from Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (no. 34):

> Hence, when preaching liberation and associating herself with those who are working and suffering for it, the Church is certainly not willing to restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems (Catholic Bishops of Malawi 1992:2).

The second synod was held a year after the start (in 2008) of the last global economic recession which lasted almost a decade. However, prior to that economic meltdown, the early 2000s seemed to have heralded the arrival of the much-awaited dawn for Africa with a high sense of optimism about NEPAD with its African Peer Review Mechanism, "Roll Back Malaria" and "Silencing the Guns in Africa". The continent was aglow with optimism that was almost reminiscent of the optimism of the 1960s and 1970s. All the right rhetoric was made and heard from every corner on the continent, as some African dictators ingenuously stirred their one-party states towards hybrid states characterised by a veneer of multiparty elections that never delivered any substantial change. Amid the euphoria of the supposedly new "dawn" of Africa, the ever realistic and well-measured Kofi Annan cautioned African leaders never to mistake wishes or hopes for reality. At the launching of the African Union in Durban, South Africa, on 9 July 2002, Annan (cited in Meredith 2006:681) warned "Let us not mistake hope for achievement." Equally important to note, the synod of 2009 was held at the heels of the famous South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that caught the

attention of the world. It also took place on the eve of the first World Cup tournament to take place on the soil of Africa. For a brief moment, all the nice things were said about the continent from where only bad news had emerged. Suddenly, "Africa rising" became the new song on every lip. It seems that, with a stroke of chance, the synodal fathers in Rome appeared to have led the way when they ended their synodal message to the people of Africa with these words: "Africa, rise up, take up your pallet, and walk! [John 5:8]" (Catholic Bishops of Africa 2009: Final Message no. 43).

6.   SOME CHALLENGES

Undeniably, like people elsewhere around the globe, Africans have the right to dream and to aspire. They are assuredly permitted to be ambitious. Nevertheless, one of the major challenges in Africa is to turn rhetoric into action. Martey (cited in Kaggwa 2005:193) rightly affirmed that "[s]ubstituting a tyranny and atrocity of the indigenous ruler for those of the foreigner is not attaining freedom". For the Church as an agent of evangelisation, it remains an incontrovertible fact that any project of evangelisation that is worth its salt requires constant conversion and renewal. Its ultimate goal must be the transformation of humanity and the whole person from within (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 18). What is at stake in Africa, from the perspective of an African Christian Humanism, is to work for the African person within his/her sociocultural, political, economic and religious contexts. Put differently, the challenge is about respecting the African man and woman, to work for the promotion of their human dignity in line with the vision of *Populorum Progressio* (1967), where the human person is understood as not being fulfilled by material prosperity alone, even though material poverty disfigures the human person and infringes upon his/her dignity as IMAGO DEI. The Malawian bishops underscored that much by acknowledging that each person carries within him-/herself the breath of divine life and, therefore, enjoys the personal protection of God. On that basis, it is possible to work for the redemption and liberation of the human person from all that shackles his/her body and spirit: poverty, oppressive situations, hunger, ignorance, disease, blindness, despair, a climate of paralysing fear, and harassment (Catholic Bishops of Malawi 1992:1, 8).

Another challenge for the African Church in the mission of social transformation of the continent is to overcome the enemy within her own circles, that is, internal ecclesial divisions. Many critics of the Church are quick to point out that the unresolved ethno-regional cleavages among the bishops weaken their credibility, and as such, prevent them from taking a united stand on socio-political and economic issues in their respective countries. In fact, they hold the view that ethno-regional differences among church leaders, and

their occasional open conflicts, are truly a "shadow theatre" that reflects the larger division in their countries (Konings 2007:47). Perhaps, it could also be that their division reflects what Krierk-Mich (2003:192) describes as "tension of perspective" in Catholic social thought, which borders on the notion of justice. There are two notions of justice in the social teaching of the Church, namely natural justice and biblical justice. This tension exists in two camps. While the biblical notion of justice is prophetic and tends to be more radical in its declaration, the natural notion of justice is more philosophical, nuanced, and diplomatic (Krierk-Mich 2003:193).

In his article on Church-State relations in Cameroon, Konings uses the divisions among the Cameroonian Catholic bishops as an example. These divisions reflect the same fault lines in the Cameroonian society, where the vast majority of francophone regions tend to believe that it is their right to dominate the minority anglophone regions. He recalls the celebrated case of Bishop Albert Ndongmo who, alone among the bishops, opposed the authoritarian regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo. For his activism in defence of fundamental human liberties particularly of those from anglophone regions, he was arrested on orchestrated charges of plotting to overthrow the government. He was sentenced to death by firing squad, but was later released after diplomatic negotiations by the Vatican. The socio-political activism of Archbishop Paul Verdzekov (former archbishop of Bemenda) and Cardinal Christian Tumi (former archbishop of Douala) was particularly vexing to Archbishop Jean Zoa of Yaoundé and other francophone bishops, especially those from the Beti region, which is the home region of President Paul Biya (Konings 2007:51-54).

During the Mobutu Sese Seko years, similar divisions, which the dictator exploited to his own advantage, were also operational among the bishops in Zaire. About the negative impacts of those divisions within the Zairian Catholic Church, Boyle (1992) is emphatic that the ethnic, personal, and ecclesiastical divisions among the bishops undermined the Church's capacity to take a united prophetic stance against the burly dictator Mobutu and ultimately played into his hands. Consequently, from the mid-1970s and through much of the 1980s, the Mobutu regime effectively fractured any possibility of the Catholic hierarchy in Zaire to serve as a credible, unified voice of opposition to that government's corruption and excesses (Boyle 1992:61).

There were also the unedifying cases of division and tension with ethnic undercurrents among Tutsi and Hutu ecclesiastics in Rwanda. Those internal divisions were never extinguished until they assumed lives of their own, especially from 1980 when the ability of the Church to hold the government accountable became too compromised because of the close ties of Bishops Joseph Ruzindana of Byumba and Vincent Nsengiyumva of Kigali with the Hutu ruling elite. Bishop Nsengiyumva doubled as a close friend of President

Juvenal Habyarimana and chairman of the ruling party's Social Affairs Committee from 1975 to 1989. He only bowed to pressures from the Vatican and relinquished that position (Safari 2010:881). On the opposite side of the divide was Bishop Aloys Bigirumwami of Nyundo who once denounced the government purge of the Tutsi from public schools and institutions. He insisted that the Law of God and the Declaration of the Rights of Man absolutely forbade the discrimination and persecution of people on the basis of tribe or race (Safari 2010:879-880). A panacea to internal ecclesial divisions is to bear in mind that the Church as a pilgrim people

> needs to hear constantly the proclamation of the mighty works of God … so that she may hear his call anew and be confirmed in unity (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 15).

On the positive side, experience has shown that, where bishops were united in their pastorals and communiqués in condemning corruption, criminality, bad governance, tribalism, injustice, and other societal ills, they have been effective in those regards. Mention has also been made of the 1992 pastoral letter of the bishops of Malawi who were the first to publicly denounce the overbearing power of Kamuzu Banda. They boldly "spoke for countless others, shouted what has historically had to be whispered, controlled, choked back, stifled and suppressed" (Mijoga 1996-1997:63). The battle between the bishops of Eritrea and President Isaias Afwerki deserves to be acknowledged. In April 2019, in their pastoral letter, the bishops angered Afwerki (President of Eritrea since 1993), when they called for a national reconciliation process, respect for human rights, and religious freedom. Eritrea under Isaias Afwerki is notorious for its violation of human rights and obligatory military conscriptions. His draconian policies have forced many Eritreans into exile. In its retaliation against the bishops for their dexterity, the government of Afwerki either closed or seized some Church schools and hospitals (Njuguma 2019; Bekit 2019). The fight between the Congolese bishops and former President Joseph Kabila could be a subject of an epic story. On many occasions, the bishops clashed with Kabila over his reluctance to leave office after his mandatory two terms had ended. They did not only criticise him, but they also offered their good offices as a medium for dialogue and negotiations over the political impasse in the biggest but sadly, one of the poorest, and possibly also the most volatile country in sub-Saharan Africa (Gettleman 2017).

7.   CONCLUSION

Africa is a continent that is constantly in a flux. Its fluidity and difficulty put the African Church to test in a determinate historical context, in which she has no choice but to respond actively and positively to the concrete realities

of Africans. While the present Africa is not the Africa of 2001, whose state was described by Tony Blair as "a scar on the conscience of the world" (cited in Whelan & Thomas 2005:1), nonetheless, the African social question has largely remained unresolved. It is worthy of note that the guns and bombs of the 1990s have been silenced in many parts of the continent, so also are the effects of poverty and hunger somewhat cushioned in some regions. All in all, any person who loves the continent cannot honestly claim that it is now *uhuru* in Africa. The prevalent realities on the ground are still quite perplexing and continue to present the world with a conspicuous paradox of what to do with Africa.

The two synods on Africa (1994 and 2009) were efforts by the Catholic Church to engage with the continent and to make her voice heard in the public space. It did so in the understanding that its mission embraces the social, political, and economic transformations of Africa. At the centre of any authentic transformation on the continent stand the human person and the promotion of human values, in order to safeguard their rights and dignity against material poverty, illiteracy, ethnicity and tribalism, corruption, and mismanagement of resources. Finding the right approach or mode of engagement can be a source of misunderstanding and, at times, even lead to internal division among church leaders who are also immersed in the quagmire that is the African social question. Perhaps, beyond the niceties of theological rhetoric and carefully written post-synodal exhortations, one pertinent question remains the same question posed by Cardinal Hyachinte Thiandoum (1994:25) of Senegal at the beginning of the first synod in 1994: "Church of Africa, what must you now become so that your message may be relevant and credible?" (see also Mpanga 2017:216).

In many ways, the credibility of the African Church does not hang in a balance for lack of official pronouncements. It is rather about its inability to activate the hands of its faithful to work for the common good. There are many Catholics in politics and in national governments across Africa. How to make them become Christian yeasts to enliven their respective societies is an uphill task. The Church, in that sense, is handicapped by the lack of credible witnesses on the part of its faithful in public services. When all is said and done, it is through the faithful that the Catholic Church in Africa can make its presence felt. It is by means of their witness that the Church can contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of Africans if it must fulfil its missionary mandate as the leaven of progress and social transformation in Africa.

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