

“Africans and Christians”: Transitioning from Missionary-Guided to a Self-Determining Local Church

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Abstract

Pope Paul VI (1963–1978), in his homily on 31 July 1969 at the closing Mass of his pastoral visit in Kampala (Uganda), told the gathered faithful that his main mission was to foster what they already were: “Africans and Christians.” Lurking behind that papal assertion was the fear that Christianity might fade away in sub-Saharan Africa after attaining political independence. That fear came close to becoming a reality in Guinea when Sékou Touré, the country’s post-independent president, experimented with Marxist ideology by expelling foreign missionaries and even imprisoned the first Guinean-born bishop. As it turned out, the Guinean experiment became one of the few rare exceptions. The post-missionary Catholic Church in Africa is believed to have started its trajectory of growth and transition in the 1970s. In terms of a continent-wide consciousness as a local church, the 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome allowed African bishops to come together to assess the situation of their local church and its post-missionary future. Their continental body, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), gave them the platform to speak in unison. Using the historical narrative approach, this research demonstrates the historical/transitional curves of Catholicism in sub-Saharan Africa in the last fifty years. Its point of reference is the 1974 Synod in Rome, whose fiftieth anniversary of convocation is in October 2024.

Keywords: Africa; Catholic Church; popes; bishops; SECAM; synod; evangelisation; development

Introduction

In 1980, when Raymond Hickey published his book, *Africa: A Case for an Auxiliary Priesthood*, he argued that from the late 1970s, it was no longer tenable to describe the

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Catholic Church in Africa as a “foreign institution” (Hickey 1980, 5). As he explained, young African bishops made a great impression with their frankness and fresh approach to issues, speaking with “verve and confidence” at the synods of 1974 and 1977, respectively (Hickey 1980, 5). The bishops were conscious of the vibrancy of their emerging young churches, as evidenced in their 1981 document, *Justice and Evangelisation in Africa*. In calling for mutual support between the young churches of Africa and the older churches outside the continent, the bishops expressed the view that the experiences of the older churches could enlighten the Catholic Church in Africa. For its part, the “youthfulness and freshness of Africa” could inspire the older churches (SECAM 1981, #34). The great success in the growth of the Catholic Church in Africa within a very short period has been described as unparalleled in the history of the missions (Bühlmann 1978, 151).

From this perspective, it is important to note that Christians of all denominations in sub-Saharan Africa were estimated to be around 25 million in 1956 (O’Neill 1972, 544). According to Patrick O’Neill, possible and notable prospects for any increase were not envisaged within the immediate horizon. On the contrary, it was rather feared that Islam might submerge the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, which was expanding about four times faster than the Catholic Church (O’Neill 1972, 544). The coming of age of the Catholic Church in Africa may also be seen in the number of its cardinals. For instance, there was no African cardinal in the conclave of 1958 that elected Pope John XXIII (1958–1963). Archbishop Laurean Rugambwa (1912–1997) of Dar-es-Salam became the first African cardinal in 1960 and the first African prelate to take part in a papal election during the conclave of 1963 that elected Pope Paul VI (1963–1978). Cardinals Paul Zoungrana (1917–2000) and Owen McCann (1907–1994) became the second set of African prelates to receive cardinal hats from Paul VI in the consistory of 25 February 1965 (Iheanacho 2021, 88). Within eighteen years, twelve African cardinals participated in the election of Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) in 1978 (Hickey 1980, 5). As Wilton Wynn has rightly observed, by creating more African cardinals and bishops and authorising the use of African languages and music in the liturgy, Paul VI, among other things, adequately prepared the ground for the maturing of the Catholic Church in Africa to become “an African Church.” He also helped African Catholics to realise that the Church and Christianity also belonged to them (Wynn 1988, 244–245).

On 26 October 1974, at the closing ceremony of the Synod of bishops in Rome, Paul VI expressed his satisfaction that the local churches energetically displayed vitality and determination to assume their proper responsibilities in the task of evangelisation. According to him, the fact that the pope was the pastor of the whole Church did not in any way absolve bishops from the onerous obligation incumbent upon them to build up the different local churches under their respective canonical jurisdictions and pastoral care (Paul VI 1975b, 11). Earlier, at the inception of the synod on 27 September 1974, he indicated that evangelisation was not “an occasional or temporary task but a permanent and constitutive dimension of the church” (Paul VI 1975a, 3). For that reason, it concerned every part of the church. Its universality entailed “the need to bring

the gospel message to all men, without exceptions based on geography, race, nationality, history or civilization” (Paul VI 1975a, 3).

For the universal church, the 1974 synod was a sort of “seminar writ large” (McNamara 1975, 5). That was not altogether surprising since it was a watershed in the contemporary history of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church, which was initially characterised by ten years of turbulence (McNamara 1975, 24). As for the Catholic Church in Africa, the synod launched it on the pathways of growth in the number of Catholic faithful and local clergy as well as the church’s self-affirmation. This research demonstrates the historical/transitional curves of Catholicism in sub-Saharan Africa in the past fifty years. It will do so through the prism of the 1974 Synod of Bishops and the navigation of the post-missionary routes under the leadership and direction of SECAM. Two landmark documents of SECAM are analysed to identify the pastoral priorities of the Catholic Church in Africa, which culminated in the two synods of bishops for Africa that took place in Rome in 1994 and 2009, respectively. In terms of nomenclature, local or particular churches are used interchangeably herein to refer to the Catholic Church either at the diocesan level or as a collective under a common national episcopal conference that is representative of the Catholic Church in a specific country. Although in missiological parlance as envisioned by Henry Venn (1796–1873), self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating should be the hallmarks for the emergence of indigenous churches (Culbertson 2023), the concern of this research is the historical excursus in the development and self-affirmation of the Catholic Church in Africa as it evolved to find a place for itself within global Catholicism. As acknowledged by SECAM during its golden jubilee celebrations in 2019, the then-nascent church was majorly preoccupied with the encouragement and training of its local African clergy as well as the formation of catechists and the nurturing of the faith of the increasing number of the Catholic lay faithful (SECAM 2019, 27).

Paul VI and the Synod of 1974 as a Matrix

Unarguably, the continuation of the Second Vatican Council after the death of John XXIII in 1963 and its successful completion in 1965 remains among the most enduring legacies of Paul VI. In the assessment of George Weigel, Paul VI “skilfully guided a sometimes fractious assembly to consensus decisions” (Weigel 2022, 248). His pontificate was saddled with thirteen years of turbulence, during which he prudently navigated through the conciliar implementations amidst different interpretations and controversies around Vatican II (Weigel 2022, 248). However, those turbulent years do not sufficiently define the role of Paul VI and his efforts to steer the church away from crisis and to refocus it on its primary calling, which is the unambiguous proclamation of the Gospel. For that reason, he strongly insisted that Vatican II was never a rupture with tradition, but rather “in continuity with the past” as in the words of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Weigel 2022, 252). Worth noting also is the fact that his pontificate was a busy one, marked by far-reaching initiatives and reforms that transformed the church in many ways.

The process of the internationalisation of the Roman Curia began with Paul VI. He attracted some of the best minds in the Catholic world at the time. This was true in his establishment of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace with the *motu proprio*, *Catholicam Christi Ecclesiam*, on 6 January 1967 (Paul VI 1967a). The maiden president of the commission was the Canadian prelate Cardinal Maurice Roy (1905–1985), and its first secretary was Msgr. Joseph Gremillion (1919–1994) from Louisiana in the United States of America. Other founding members of the commission included the renowned Catholic British economist Lady Barbara Ward (1914–1981) and the American expert and advocate for refugees and migrants, James Joseph Norris (1907–1976) (Pelzel 2024). This team of experts and social activists, with their social consciousness, prepared Paul VI’s signature social encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, published on 26 March 1967 (Wynn 1988, 222). Archbishop Bernardin Gantin (1922–2008) of the Republic of Benin was appointed by Paul VI as the vice president of the commission in 1975 and eventually became its first African president on 16 December 1976 (Cerchietti et al. 2010, 17). Gantin was later created as a cardinal alongside Joseph Ratzinger by Paul VI in the consistory of 27 June 1977.

In marking the fortieth anniversary of its publication in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI described the social teaching of Paul VI as outlined in *Populorum Progressio* to be of “great importance” because “he underlined the indispensable importance of the Gospel for building a society according to freedom and justice, in the ideal and historical perspective of a civilisation animated by love.” In proposing “the notion of development, understood in human and Christian terms, he identified the heart of the Christian social message, and he proposed Christian charity as the principal force at the service of development” (Benedict XVI 2009a, 13). He equally “addressed important ethical questions robustly without yielding to the cultural weaknesses of his time” (Benedict XVI 2009a, 13). Without exaggeration, *Populorum Progressio* was used as a form of *vade mecum* during the synod of 1974, particularly against what Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens (1904–1996) aptly called “Christianity without Christ”. According to him, it was “a pursuit of Christian values torn from the gospel matrix” with the secularisation of Christian values that may ultimately lead to the forgetfulness of God (McNamara 1975, 10). This concern was reflected in the final declaration of the synod on 25 October 1974, where the bishops described secularism as an ideology “which completely excludes God from the horizon of human life and therefore from the profound meaning of existence” (Synod of Bishops 1975a, 8). Although the main theme of the synod was “Evangelisation in the Modern World,” the questions of social justice, integral human development, and human liberation received considerable attention, especially as they were related to the church’s work of evangelisation. The declaration incorporated social concerns by indicating a “mutual relationship between evangelization and integral salvation or the complete liberation of man and peoples” (Synod of Bishops 1975a, 12). The same message is contained in the synod’s statement on human rights and reconciliation (23 October 1974), where it is said that the church “believes firmly that the promotion of human rights is required by the gospel and is central to her ministry” (Synod of Bishops 1975b, 21). Consequently, the bishops

expressed the “desire to raise” their “voices on behalf of the voiceless victims of injustice” (Synod of Bishops 1975b,21).

During the consultation process before its convocation, many episcopal conferences suggested that the family should be the central theme of the synod. Had that been the case, as argued by Raoul Dederen, it would have been inevitable for the synod not to discuss divisive issues such as abortion, birth control, and world population (Dederen 1975, 9). Paul VI had treated those questions in *Humanae Vitae* (1968), but it did not go down well with certain segments of the Catholic episcopate. Hence, evangelisation must have been considered a “safe” theme (Dederen 1975, 9). The positive and serene atmosphere of discussions during the synod proved the wisdom of that choice since the subject matter was less contentious than the previous synods of 1967, 1969, and 1971 (McNamara 1975, 24). With contributions from Latin American bishops, the synod was steered to emphasise the relevance of evangelisation to human liberation and integral development (Carter 1975, 299–300). Beyond that, as noted by Kevin McNamara, the synod devoted a great deal of its time to the church’s role in evangelisation, which it identified as the primary and essential work of the church. It consists of making Christ known through preaching, the liturgy, and the witness of life and deeds. The synod frowned at the tendency to judge the church primarily and exclusively by its political effectiveness because the primary aim of the church is not about earthly progress but essentially the ultimate destiny of human beings, that is, the salvation of souls (McNamara 1975, 10, 19).

However, as wisely observed by Archbishop Roger Etchegaray (1922–2019) during the synod, “the church does not possess the secret of evangelization” but “from day to day must discern the ways of God” (cited in McNamara 1975, 5). Against that background, representatives of continental episcopal conferences came to the synod with peculiar challenges of evangelisation from their different parts of the world (McNamara 1975, 5). For European bishops, the major challenge was the increasing spread of atheism, together with pervasive doubt that led to a fast-decreasing number of the faithful who practised the faith. As for North American and Australian bishops, the comprehension of the faith was undergoing “a purifying process” that engendered a somewhat doctrinal confusion (McNamara 1975, 9). Expectedly, given the ascendancy of liberation theology in the middle 1970s, the concerns of Latin American bishops were questions of social and economic justice, political liberation as well as the preferential option for the poor. Their keyword was “conscientization,” understood as a more significant commitment on the part of the church for social justice (Dederen 1975, 9). The preoccupations of Asian and African bishops as leaders of their young churches were slightly aligned, although with clear divergence in terms of emphasis. For the Asian bishops, their emphasis was on the legitimate autonomy of local churches and the question of acculturation, as well as their relationship with non-Christian religions. The African bishops stressed “Africanisation” or “indigenisation” as a primary concern. From their standpoint, the concept of “Africanisation” or “indigenisation” implied that the time had come for the Catholic Church in Africa to stand firmly and assume

responsibility for its future. This would demand creativity and discernment (McNamara 1975, 6–9).

Behind the declaration and the statement on human rights and reconciliation lies the disagreement and disapproval by the bishops of the draft of the final document. According to Archbishop Samuel Carter (1919–2002), the rejection of the draft signalled the maturity and strength of the post-conciliar development of the synod of bishops as an institution. A significant reason for the disagreement was the lack of sufficient time at the disposal of bishops to review the draft before the final voting of the text to be submitted to the pope for his consideration. Given the time constraint, it was impossible for a final text to emerge that would have accurately represented a synthesis of various opinions (Carter 1975, 296). Since it was never an affront to the pope, the bishops, in their declaration, “preferred to offer the integral fruits of our exchange to the Holy Father with great confidence and simplicity, and to await new impetus from him” (Synod of Bishops 1975a, 3). It is equally important to note that the contribution of the African bishops to the synod was remarkable. Their collective synodal presentation entitled “Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelisation in Africa” stressed that evangelisation concerned the salvation of the human person both spiritually and materially. Their view was reflected in the final declaration that emphasised the unique and intimate connection between evangelisation and liberation. Considering that connection, the synod taught that the Church is obliged to proclaim and actively work for the “integral liberation” of people everywhere (Zalot 2002, 148).

In incorporating the propositions from the bishops in the preparation of the post-synodal exhortation, Paul VI wanted the publication of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council, which formally ended on 8 December 1965 (Werning, 2022). Published on 8 December 1975, Paul VI links the synod of 1974 to the great objectives of the council, which, according to him, could be “summed up in this single one: to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century” (*EN* #2). With his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Paul VI provided the desired “new impetus” that the bishops had requested. Pope Francis, in his speech on 22 June 2013 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the pontifical election of Paul VI, described *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as “the greatest pastoral document that has ever been written to this day” (Francis 2013). It is no wonder that *Populorum Progressio* and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* are two documents that were often cited in major documents of SECAM in the early 1980s when the Catholic Church in Africa sought to establish itself as it began its upward trajectories toward consolidation and growth. Specifically, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* appeared in many of SECAM’s documents and statements on the role of the church in African development (Zalot 2002, 149). Significantly, until 1998, the matrix of the 1974 synod was demonstrated in the vitality of the superabundance of church documents on economic and social questions. It has been shown that of all ecclesial documents issued in that regard since *Rerum Novarum* (1891) by the Vatican and episcopal conferences

around the world, half of them came after the publication of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (McGoldrick 1998, 28).

Navigating towards a Post-Missionary Church

In the January 1970 edition of the *International Review of Mission*, the renowned missionary statistician David Barrett (1927–2011) published his famous article entitled “AD 2000: 350 million Christians in Africa.” Barrett estimated that the population of African Christians would reach 350 million by the year 2000 (O’Neill 1972, 544; Zurlo 2023). He somewhat adjusted that estimate in another article published in the same year in the October issue of *Agenzia Fides* (International Catholic Mission News Service). The significance of the second article is not so much about the adjustment of the estimated number but the advice of Barrett to the secretary of the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples. He stressed the need to make adequate preparations for the anticipated increase and the difficulties that such a substantial increase might bring (O’Neill 1972, 544). In terms of increase, the number of Catholics in Africa was estimated to be around 1.5 million in 1900. That figure increased to about 16 million by 1958 (Calderisi 2013, 95). It was a positive development that naturally put pressure on the nascent churches in different parts of Africa regarding the problem of an insufficient number of pastoral personnel given an already decreasing number of missionaries from Europe (O’Neill 1972, 544).

The problem of providing adequate personnel and devising an appropriate pastoral structure to meet the fast-growing Catholic population’s pastoral needs continued into the early 1980s. Naturally, the problem was more acute in some countries than in others, such as Chad, where there were only six local Chadian priests. A place like northern Cameroon was yet to witness the ordination of its first indigenous priest (Hickey 1980, 11). Between the middle of 1950 and the late 1970s, the slow beginning of local African vocations to the priesthood was a significant concern for ecclesiastical administrators in Rome and on the continent. The availability of a sufficient number of priests, especially from the local communities, was considered vital to the future of the Catholic Church in Africa. Archbishop Mark Mihayo (1907–1995) of Tabora (Tanzania) highlighted the difficulties confronting the young churches due to the lack of priests. He was the first local prelate to be made an archbishop in East and Central Africa in 1960. Commenting on the situation in his 1968 article “African Clergy,” published in *Clergy Review*, he made a comparison between the pastoral situations in Europe and Africa, with the conclusion that the lack of sufficient priests in the latter ought to be the concern of the whole church (cited in Hickey 1980, 1):

Must we see the people of God in Africa starve spiritually? I do not mean starve to death. Must we turn our backs on thousands of non-Christians who are receiving the gift of Faith?... In Europe, the tragedy may be that people do not turn anymore to Christianity. In Africa, the tragedy can be that the people hold out their hands for Christianity, for the sacramental life, and that there is nobody to give it to them. It is surely the concern of the whole Church that this should not be so.

It is worth recalling that the pastoral needs of the local churches in Africa, particularly the dearth of personnel, prompted Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) to publish his second and last important missionary encyclical. His principal missionary document remains *Evangelii Praecones*, published on 2 June 1951. His ten other documents were mission-related letters and admonitions. The encyclical *Fidei Donum* (FD), published on Easter Sunday, 21 April 1957, locates the mission of the church within the Easter-Pentecost event, while its primary goal was to draw the attention of the whole church to the pressing missionary needs of Africa (Kroeger 2013, 97). The subtitle of the encyclical is particularly indicative of its general motif: “On the Present Condition of the Catholic Missions in Africa”. Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905–1991), in his capacity as the apostolic delegate to French West Africa, made considerable inputs in the drafting of the document. The sense of urgency and the general anxiety that the opportunity to evangelise Africa appeared to be fast slipping away were expressed in 1957 by Isidore Perraud (secretary to Lefebvre in Dakar): “Africa awaits missionaries and catechists: it is ‘last quarter hour’” (Foster 2019, 248–9). Eleven years after the publication of *Fidei Donum*, Archbishop Mihayo called Africa “the heart of the missionary church” (cited in Hickey 1980, 11). From that perspective, he wrote: “If I was asked, as an African bishop, which are the great problems of the church in Africa, I would have a long list. But the greatest preoccupation is certainly priestly vocations” (Hickey 1980, 15).

Fidei Donum is divided into four parts. After presenting a general overview of the situation in Africa socio-politically as well as culturally and religiously, he goes into detail to highlight peculiar missionary problems of the continent on account of the insufficiency of means and personnel “required for a satisfactory prosecution of missionary effort” (FD #23). Seeking to galvanise the support of the whole church, he emphasises that “this state of the African apostolate... makes it manifest that in Africa it is not a question of merely local problems that can eventually be solved without any reference to those that touch upon the entire Christian community” (FD #35). According to Pius XII, concerns for the missions in Africa were also expressions of the universality of the church. This is because concern for a particular local church by the entire Church “is a true mark of the Catholic character of the living Church” (FD #44). This universality, as expressed in the concerns for the missions in Africa, made it possible to send diocesan priests to assist in mission areas. It has remained a lasting missionary legacy of Pius XII, and the reality of “Fidei Donum priests” has become “one of the ‘new forms of aid’ for mission” (Kroeger 2013, 98).

Africa was still primarily a missionary continent in the waning two decades of colonialism. Within those decades, the Catholic Church, especially in the sub-Saharan regions of the continent, was confronted with some major problems that threatened not only the survival of Catholicism but also Christianity in some places. Most of those threats occurred when the continent was under the dictatorial grip of what Martin Meredith calls “the dinosaur generation” of Africa (Meredith 2006, 611). There was exaggerated nationalism, especially in some Francophone countries such as Guinea, where the government of Ahmed Sékou Touré expelled the missionaries and left the

church with only Msgr. Raymond Tchidimbo in Conakry and eight priests. There was equally the fear of Islamic expansion and onslaught in West Africa epitomised in 1965 by Ahmadu Bello (1910–1966), the Sardauna of Sokoto in northern Nigeria and vice president of the World Muslim League. The aim was to arrest the incursion of Christianity in that part of the country. It failed due to the military coup of 1966 that tumbled the post-independence government in Nigeria. Missionaries were expelled from eastern Nigeria in 1970 after the bloody civil war (1967–1970) that claimed the lives of many people in that region of the country (Hickey 1980, 8).

The drive towards Islamisation in sub-Saharan Africa got some momentum with Muammar Gaddafi (1942–2011), who courted some politicians in the region in a bid to win them over to Islam. That initiative was not successful on a grand scale apart from the isolated case of Omar Bongo of Gabon (1935–2009), who became a Muslim in 1973. It was rather more for political expediency than for religious conviction since his “conversion” was anchored on his policy of rapprochement towards Morocco and Libya. Locally, it did not provoke mass conversions from Christianity to Islam. It enabled him to consolidate his domination of Gabon because many government officials also became Muslims as an expression of loyalty to Bongo and to enjoy the benefits of the largesse of political patronage (Ngolet 2000, 61). A similar “conversion” occurred with Jean-Bédél Bokassa (1921–1996), who instantly declared himself a Muslim during Gaddafi’s visit to Central African Republic in 1976. Bokassa’s flirtation with Islam was a short-lived political romance unlike that of Bongo (Hickey 1980, 9). In a place like Sudan, the aggressive twin policy of Arabisation and Islamisation of the country took a different turn. It made the survival of the local church very precarious, particularly with the expulsion of missionaries from the southern part of Sudan in 1964. That expulsion deprived the church of its pastoral personnel except for one Sudanese bishop and twenty-eight priests who were saddled with the responsibility of taking care of nearly half a million Catholics and catechumens. Similar attempts were made by the government of Ahmadou Ahidjo (1924–1989) at the total Islamization of northern Cameroon (Hickey 1980, 8).

Within the context of post-independence and post-missionary Africa, one of the central questions was how to interlace an amicable relation between an emerging local hierarchy and increasingly assertive African political leaders, especially on their home fronts (Hanson 1990, 259). In the southern part of the continent, the church adopted a certain form of “*diplomatic modus vivendi*” in its dealings with the racist governments in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa. After its disastrous cosy rapport with Portuguese repressive colonial governments in Angola and Mozambique, the churches in those countries needed to tread cautiously to survive the provocations from their post-independence governments, often motivated by anticlerical and Marxist sentiments (Hickey 1980, 6). The church adopted a similar attitude of tolerated aloofness in Equatorial Guinea, where Francisco Macías Nguema (1924–1979) was convinced that God created the country, thanks to him, Nguema. He banned Christianity and declared himself the Grand Master of Education (Kenyon 2018, 269, 271). It took a more

confrontational position in Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo) during the “Zairianization” of the country based on “Mobutuism” and its programme of *authenticité* as dictated by Mobutu Sese Seko (Kenyon 2018, 37). In neighbouring Congo-Brazzaville, the church resisted President Alphonse Massambo-Débat’s government policy of nationalising Catholic schools. Unfortunately, the political upheavals of the country with tribal undertones led to the gruesome killing on 22 March 1977 of Cardinal Émile Biayenda of Brazzaville (1927–1977) (Evuters 1977; Elenga 2006, 48; Iheanacho 2022, 7–8). The cause for his beatification and canonisation is currently in progress. The diocesan stage of the process, which opened on 21 October 1996 and was completed on 14 June 2003, prepared the ground for the process to continue (Agenzia Fides, 2004).

Essentially, as Hickey asserts, some of the fears of Pius XII about the survival of the church in Africa, as evident in *Fidei Donum*, appeared to have been realised between 1960 and 1980. Positively, those fears elicited favourable responses from Catholic missionary energy with a remarkable focus on the emerging local churches in Africa (Hickey 1980, 8, 11). Paul VI, in his lauding of the insight of Pius XII, described *Fidei Donum* as a pontifical missionary document that “marked a very important stage in the journey of the evangelization” of Africa (*Africae Terrarum* #2). For his part, Paul VI sought to smoothen further the ground for the Catholic Church on the continent. He did that through his 1969 pastoral visit to Ugandan and the formal establishment of SECAM. In his address to the Ugandan parliament on 1 August 1969, he sought to allay the fears that some African governments might have been harbouring toward the church (Paul VI 1969a):

Have no fear of the Church; she honours you, she educates honest and loyal citizens for you, she does not foment rivalries and divisions, she seeks to promote healthy liberty, social justice, and peace. If she has any preference at all, it is for the poor, for the education of little ones and of the people, for the care of the suffering and abandoned. . . . The Church does not make her faithful sons strangers to civil life and national interests; on the contrary, she trains and engages them in the service of the public good.

Generally, the coming of age of Christianity in modern Africa coincided with the triumphalism of the pan-African movement for political independence of the continent. Paul Bowers has perceptively noted that modern Africa is largely the creation of the twentieth-century movement of Pan-Africanism, coupled with the needs and aspirations of its educated elites. The euphoria of its political nationalism did not differentiate between colonialism and Christianity with its missionary thrusts since it tended to treat the two as one reality (Bowers 2002, 114–115). It was within that context that it was feared that Christianity would progressively become less significant in post-independence Africa because of its close association with Western colonialism (Gifford 2016, 11). Paul VI again addressed those preoccupations in his apostolic letter *Africae Terrarum* (1967) by anchoring the defence of Christians and the preservation of their faith on the equality of all citizens, which “is based on common origin and common destiny of those who belong to the human family.” Therefore, it behoves civil society

to accord an “explicit recognition of the essential rights of every human being” which unquestionably includes religious liberty (*Africae Terrarum* #18). He paid tribute to the labours of missionaries, acknowledging that “much has been done” although much remained to be done.

It was in that view, according to Paul VI, that the Church considered it wise to establish local hierarchy almost everywhere in Africa without waiting “for the nationalist movements to initiate Africans into positions of responsibility in the priesthood and episcopate” (*Africae Terrarum* #23–24). Such elevation carried an obligation not only toward preserving and completing the works already begun by missionaries but crucially toward further development for which no stone must be left unturned (*Africae Terrarum* #25–27). He returned to the same theme two years later, on 31 July 1969, in his homily at the closing of the First Plenary Assembly of SECAM in Kampala (Uganda): “By now, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves. The Church of Christ is well and truly planted in this blessed soil... “Missionaries to yourselves”: in other words, you Africans must now continue, upon this continent, the building of the church... You, Africans are now assuming its direction” (Paul VI 1969b). As hitherto noted, with the creation of more African cardinals and the appointment of more indigenous bishops, together with his pontifical injunctions, Pope Paul VI provided the local churches in Africa with the rudder to navigate through the immediate post-missionary stage towards maturity.

SECAM and the Catholic Church in Africa

The collective presentation by the African bishops at the 1974 synod was delivered on their behalf by Bishop James D. Sangu (1920–1998) of Mbeya Diocese (Tanzania). Apart from recounting the history of the continent’s contact with Christianity, the document drew a parallel between the emergence of the churches in Africa and the phenomenal process of decolonisation of the continent. That parallel between 1957 and 1974 was significant because, by 1974, most of the former mission circumscriptions or territories had become dioceses together with corresponding local hierarchies. Their aggregation as “local churches” signified the “coming-of-age” of the churches and a major turning point in the history of the Catholic Church in Africa. As Pope Paul VI had previously indicated, the bishops acknowledged that the remaining task of evangelisation was the primary and collective responsibility of the African Church (Sangu 1974, 15–16). This aspect of the document was re-echoed in the final declaration by the African bishops with the title “Evangelisation and Communion.” They stated that the emerging local churches in Africa were required to demonstrate visible responsibility for the evangelisation and promotion of integral human development in Africa. They were equally to display their creativity with manifest dynamism (African Bishops 1975, 290).

The Catholic Church in Africa does not always get the credit it deserves for demanding the internationalisation of the Roman Curia. The bishops insisted that

“internationalisation” must be done “following the signs of our times and thinking of most African countries.” In their view, the Vatican was even accused of “practising nationalism in the Catholic Church” (Sangu 1974, 35). To redress the imbalance of representations in papal diplomatic service, the African bishops requested that “the Holy See should see to it that the image of the Vatican Diplomatic Corps takes a more universal (Catholic) character than the present one which is seen as ‘mostly Italian’” (Sangu 1974, 35). Commenting on the assertiveness of the bishops, especially as captured in their final declaration, *Time Magazine* wrote that the bishops of Africa and Madagascar were “unabashed” in their joint statement with the insistence that “the church in Africa become a faith “incarnate” in the continent through the application of African values, and not merely be an adaptation of European Catholicism” (Time Magazine 1974). With the progression of time, “the incarnation” of Christianity would become one of the central preoccupations of the African church for most parts of the 1980s and the early 1990s. “Human Development” was another major programmatic concern of the bishops, as outlined in their collective synodal presentation.

The bishops highlighted the question of human development and liberation as very appropriate to Africa, where the church was called to continue the prophetic mission of Christ. They judged it their responsibility to stand up against all that would degrade the human person or lead to injustice, violence, oppression, racism, wars, and evils of any kind. This prophetic mission was to propel the church to function as the “soul” of the development and progress of Africa by infusing spiritual values into the society to animate integral development. Those values include “love, justice, respect for the human person, cooperation, industriousness, discipline, loyalty, and peace” (Sangu 1974, 21). On this basis, the church’s involvement in development and its charitable works were considered constitutive parts of evangelisation, which also implies being at the forefront in defence of freedom of religion and worship and in denunciation of false and oppressive political ideologies when necessary (Sangu 1974, 21, 31). This is one aspect of the prophetic mission that the bishops under the umbrella of SECAM have been most prolific in their statements and pronouncements. They have done so in consonance with contemporary Catholic Social Teaching. They also followed in the footsteps of contemporary papacy, which, according to José Casanova, has efficiently taken up the role of spokesperson for humanity, for the dignity of the human person, for world peace and a fair economic system, particularly in favour of poor countries (Casanova 1996, 356). It shows that the bishops of Africa are conversant with trends in social Catholicism because the question of human and economic development has been an outstanding and recurring feature in post-Vatican II Catholic Social Teaching (Zalot 2002, xi).

To their credit, the Catholic bishops of Africa, between the end of Vatican II in 1965 and 2002, issued over 170 documents on economics and integral development (Zalot 2002, 143). The African bishops were ranked third as the most prolific after European and Latin American bishops when *Economie et développement: Répertoire des documents épiscopaux des cinq continents* (1891–1991) was published in 1997. The

first position went to European bishops, with 37%, followed by Latin American bishops, with 29%, while African bishops were in the third position, with 14%. North American bishops ranked fourth, with 10%; Asian bishops were in fifth position, with 7%; and Oceanian bishops ranked sixth with 3% (McGoldrick 1998, 28). Thematically, the African bishops wrote much more than other continental episcopal conferences on corruption, integral development, education, health, well-being, economic goals, and justice (McGoldrick 1998, 29). In the analysis of Terence McGoldrick, education is at the topmost in the consideration of African bishops, followed by human rights and corruption. It does not mean that poverty is less of a concern since it is simply everywhere on the continent. The stress on education is rooted in the belief that it leads to empowerment and the development of economic skills. Even at the risk of being misunderstood, bishops consider speaking on social questions to be their prophetic and magisterial duties (McGoldrick 1998, 24, 29).

Similarly, corruption features more prominently in pronouncements by African bishops than in those by their Latin American counterparts. It is almost practically absent in documents by European and North American bishops. In a particular instance, the bishops of Guinea, typical of African bishops, once depicted corruption as the most destructive enemy of development in Africa, probably as ravaging as HIV-AIDS (McGoldrick 1998, 29–31, 43). This analysis indicates that the bishops of Africa have not remained aloof from the existential problems of their respective countries. This fact renders contestable the assertion of Stan Ilo that the Catholic Church moved faster in Latin America than in Africa in the translation of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* into local idioms regarding options for the poor (Ilo 2017, 64). True, preferential option for the poor produced a Latin American saint in the violent death of Oscar Romero (1917–1980). However, it is equally valid that the Catholic Church in Africa has produced some courageous bishops like Bishop Albert Ndongmo (1926–1992) of Nkongsamba (Cameroon), Archbishop Philippe Fanoko Kpodzro (1930–2024) of Lomé (Togo), Archbishop Benard Yago (1916–1997) of Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) (Konings 2007; Atemanke, 2024; Sarr 2020). Its martyred bishops are not lacking such as Cardinal Émile Biayenda of Congo-Brazzaville, Bishop Christophe Munihirwa Ngabo (1926–1996) of Bukavu (Democratic Republic of Congo), and Bishop Salvatore Colombo (1922–1989) of Mogadishu (Somalia), whose cathedral has remained desolate since his cruel death on 9 July 1989 (Allen 2012; Roman Catholic Mission Somalia 2013; Cavanaugh 2019). Their witness recalls the message from the persecuted churches to the 1974 synod in which it was said: “The shadow of tyranny, in one form or another, is never far from the Church of Christ” (McNamara 1975, 20).

Two important documents were issued by SECAM in the immediate post-1974 synodal years: (a) *Justice and Evangelisation in Africa* (1981) and (b) *The Church and Human Promotion in Africa Today* (1984). As landmark documents, they may be described as the masterpieces of SECAM. The weaving of their theological insights and depths makes them the crown jewels of all subsequent documents of SECAM. In the assessment of Jozef Zalot, a sharp decline is unmistakably evident in the quantity and

quality of SECAM statements and pronouncements after these two outstanding documents of the early 1980s (Zalot 2002, 221). They were follow-ups to “Report on the Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelisation in Africa” and “Evangelisation and Communion” (1974). There was also the position of SECAM in 1969, where the bishops unequivocally affirmed that to ignore or disregard poverty, hunger, and oppression in Africa meant having failed as shepherds (Zalot 2002, 183). In this light, the two documents were meant to develop pastoral priorities for the African Church and its direction, as pointedly articulated in the conclusion of “Report on the Experiences of the Church in the Work of Evangelisation in Africa” (Sangu 1974, 38–39):

As we look to the future, we realise that our plans for the Church in the coming years will only succeed in the measure to which the entire Christian community shares in the life and mission of Christ... We are convinced that it is only in our total involvement as living members of Christ that the Church will be salt, leaven and light of mankind in our countries... We dare forecast that Africa will truly be the land of Christianity.

Justice and Evangelisation in Africa was the outcome of the sixth Plenary Assembly of SECAM on 5 July 1981 in Yaoundé (Cameroon). Top on the agenda was “Marriage and Christian Family in Africa Today.” However, the bishops considered it necessary to issue a declaration that would broadly examine the Christian understanding of justice and its application in Africa. This was done in consideration of evangelisation and its bearings to the family as the domestic church, as well as the proper ordering of the civil society in which the family lives and which the church is sent to evangelise. The declaration highlights the strong bonds between evangelisation and human promotion, between development and liberation (Ogunu 2005, 1025). In stating that “the total dimension of the Gospel includes justice, and evangelisation must produce its fruits,” the document calls upon the church to be at the service of justice since “a Church is not yet fully rooted among a people if it does not try to establish justice and accomplish its works” (#3). It describes the Church in Africa as an “instrument of justice and peace” (#15), charged with the commitment to assist in the elimination of “every trace of racism and discrimination,” with the strong injunction that no person was permitted to “encourage tribalism by his words or attitudes” (#16).

Interestingly, it is regarded as an act of “justice and mutual respect” that the Catholic Church in Africa should be given a free hand to set its pastoral priorities (#17). This is of utmost importance because “a church which allows and leaves room for a diversity of cultures offers the kind of witness to which our continent is particularly sensitive” (#18). On active participation in public life, especially on the part of Christians, it maintains that the demands of the Gospel do not stop short at the thresholds of social, political and economic life. On the contrary, by their participation in public life, which is both a right and an obligation, citizens are to work to establish justice or at least prepare the necessary road or pathway to justice (#27). Regarding speaking out and denouncing societal ills and misgovernance, reference was made to the 1971 Synod of Bishops on “Justice in the World”. The bishops appropriated the words of that synod in

referring to their prophetic mission in Africa: “Our mission demands that we should courageously denounce injustice with charity, prudence, and firmness, in sincere dialogue with all parties concerned” (#30). Although speaking out for the cause of justice is commendable, the bishops highlighted “dialogue” as the first preference. This is based on the understanding that “the effectiveness of an intervention is not necessarily measured by the degree of verbal violence or the sensation aroused by a speech. According to our tradition, priority must be given to man-to-man dialogue” (#30).

The *African Report* at the Assembly of Third World Theologians in 1986 in Mexico lauded African Catholic bishops for the themes of their declarations that placed “emphasis on the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious challenges” on the continent. It specifically mentions “The Church and Human Promotion Today in Africa” and clearly states that “evangelization and human promotion are one and the same task” (*African Report* 1990, 43, 56). Initially prepared in Lomé (Togo) on the directives of SECAM, *The Church and Human Promotion Today in Africa* was finally approved in Kinshasa (Zaire) at the 7th Plenary Assembly of SECAM that was held from 15 to 22 July 1984 (Ogunu 2005, 1366). Issued as a “pastoral exhortation”, the document is significantly longer than the previous document of 1981. It is also very condensed in its treatment of issues since it incorporates key messages of other previous SECAM documents as well as pontifical and ecclesial documents on the subject matter. Its analysis of the African situation is elaborate in that it sees a vital role of the Gospel in defence of the dignity of the human person and respect for human rights. Given its title, the question of economic and human development features very prominently. Woven around the theme of “life”, the document straightforwardly asserts that speaking of “human promotion today is to express the aspiration for life, for survival and self-fulfilment which is deeply implanted in the heart of each person and of each nation” (#3). It links this assertion to an earlier statement of SECAM after its First Plenary Assembly in Kampala in 1969, where the bishops described “the struggle for the development of people and for peace” to be “the problem of greatest priority of our time” (#5).

The treatment of Africa’s economic, social, and political realities portrays a continent at a disadvantage. While the socio-economic realities might differ from one country to another, the document observes with regret that Africa, overall, was inextricably dependent upon either capitalist or Marxist ideologies of the time. For the bishops, the accusation against foreign interests and the big powers as the only ones responsible for the sufferings of poor Africans was a sort of diversionary tactic. African leaders employed such accusations as cover-ups for their internal waste of public funds and their political and socio-economic failures (#21–22). Charles Valy Tuho, former Ivorian ambassador and a former member of the board of trustees for the International Food Policy Research Institute, once took a swipe at the bishops for their analysis of the African economic situation. He dismissed the thoughts and proposals of the bishops as full of “ambiguities”. Tuho suggested that the bishops ought to get a better education

on economic “complexities” to help them construct a more convincing social message on a solid foundation (Zalot 2002, 220).

Tuho and his kind failed to realise that when bishops speak on political economy, they do so as pastors and visionaries. According to the late South African human rights icon Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931–2021), bishops envision a possible just and fair society. However, the task of its nitty-gritty and practical actualisation is left to others with the required competence: “But then we are visionaries. We hope we are visionaries. And we leave it to others to try and put flesh to the things we try to dream” (cited in Novak 1991, 33). With the passage of time and the continuous shrinking prospects of African economic development, the bishops deserve commendation for seeing what African politicians and their economists did not see forty years ago. Unfortunately, as Robert Calderisi has shown, on account of the self-interests of African elites, the continent “has exposed itself to generalization through its spectacular failures” since it remains the only continent that has continuously grown poorer (Calderisi 2006, 4). As was the case in the early 1980s regarding a certain conception and pattern of “development” to which the bishops sought to draw direction attention (Calderisi 2006, 26):

Scores of stadiums, monuments, conference halls, luxury hotels, palaces, motorways are built, expensive jet aeroplanes purchased, steel mills planned, television services opened – while the peasant finds his ration of rice or maize becoming ever smaller. These circumstances are the products of policies controlled by men – African men – not by such abstractions as ‘neo-colonialism’. And they can be changed by men.

The theological basis for the church’s involvement in temporal affairs outlined in the document is genial. In the first place, it asserts that the belief in God also implies a commitment on the part of believers to work for a world that is habitable for everyone (#62). In this belief is located the centrality of the Eucharist, defined as “the source from which we imbibe faith, hope and charity, which give us the strength to plunge each day into human distress and face the despair of our miseries” (#65). Anchored on the Eucharist as “the mystery of divinisation and the promotion of man” (#67), the same Eucharist obliges those who participate in it “to refuse to see within the community a certain number of one’s brothers and sisters being left crouching in their utter want or left suffering from exploitation, injustice or ignorance” (#68).

In the second place is the synergy of divine actions and human responsibility as connected to the Eucharist. Therein, divine actions do not eliminate but rather ennoble human initiative and the obligation to build a just and fair earthly city. Put differently, faith does not demobilise; instead, it propels the dynamism of hope and the creativity of charity in the service of God and fellow human beings. In this regard, the bread and wine, natural elements for the celebration of the Eucharist, become the centre of encounter where God meets human beings, and human beings, in turn, meet one another (# 69–70). As a eucharistic community, the commitment of the African Church to human promotion and development springs from its primary mission, which is the

proclamation of the Good News to the poor. Therefore, the task of human promotion is “an integral dimension and inner requirement of its work of evangelisation” (#83). It is not considered as “optional or supplementary” for the church. It is pre-eminently “an authentic ministry inscribed in the fundamental vocation of the church” (#97). It is also the essential task of the lay faithful through which “they find the most crucial domain of their participation in the mission of the church” (#100).

To be inserted within the linear progression of the Catholic Church in Africa are the two synods of bishops for Africa that took place in Rome within the past thirty years. The first synod took place in 1994 during Pope John Paul II’s pontificate, who issued a post-synodal apostolic exhortation entitled *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995). It was made public in Yaoundé (Cameroon) during John Paul II’s eleventh pastoral visit to Africa. The second synod was in 2009 under the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, with *Africae Munus* (2011) as its corresponding post-synodal apostolic exhortation, which was formally presented in Quidah (Republic of Benin). The first synod examined the theme: “The Church in Africa and her evangelising mission towards the Year 2000: ‘You will be my witnesses’ (Acts 1:8).” As for the second synod, its theme was: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” An important link exists between the two synods. The 1994 synod developed the identity of the church in Africa as “the family of God” and described its nature. Evangelisation was underscored as its main pastoral priority, and its different aspects were highlighted as helping to build up the church in Africa. The synod of 2009 examined the unique mission of “the family of God” in Africa. Its focus was on the church’s activity and mission as “salt of the earth, light of the world.” The intrinsic connection of both synods means that the Catholic Church in Africa, upholding its identity as the “family of God”, is on a mission to serve the causes of reconciliation, justice and peace on the continent (*Mumemo Declaration* 2010, 2; Henriot 2011, 234).

According to Pope Benedict XVI, reconciliation, justice, and peace are three important themes with theological and social responsibilities. They carry spiritual and political implications that demand a careful balance if the Church must fulfil its mission “as sentinel” by avoiding two inherent dangers: over-spiritualisation and over-politicisation (Benedict XVI 2009b). The rightful competence of pastors is to “transform theology into pastoral care” and “not to succumb to the temptation to enter personally into politics, and from being pastors, to become political leaders” (Benedict XVI 2009c). The same caution is equally valid for the plethora of Catholic social services that dot every corner of the continent. Regrettably, as Paul Gifford has prudently observed, Catholicism in Africa has increasingly become more identified by its social and development works rather than for its religious appeal and evangelisation on the continent (Gifford 2016, 97, 107). This is one of the unintended offshoots of the social involvement of the church in the last fifty years. Yet, this ought not to have been the case because Pope Benedict XVI cautioned in the motu proprio, *On the Service of Charity*: “The Church’s charitable activity at all levels must avoid the risk of becoming just another form of organized social assistance” (Benedict XVI 2012).

The above observation, notwithstanding, shows that the Catholic Church in Africa has a lot of credits in its ledger. African Catholicism adds colour to the tapestries of global Catholicism and contemporary Christianity. This much is contained in the *Kampala Document*, published in 2019, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of SECAM. It is presented as a programme of renewal of faith and a pastoral instrument for a new missionary commitment toward a renewed Africa (SECAM 2019, 3, 10). Anchored on the theme, “That they may know Christ and have life in abundance”, the document is meant to guide the life and mission of the church family of God in Africa. Consequentially, the bishops acknowledge that it requires a spirit of action and commitment for the realisation of that vision of the church family that would manifest itself as the visible presence of God’s kingdom in Africa. The *Kampala Document* represents the bishops’ collective efforts to infuse a spirit of freshness and zest into the Catholic Church in Africa and its mission. Its overall purpose is to re-energise the church-family by offering it the opportunity to hear afresh that historic exhortation of Paul VI, which was made on African soil on that memorable 31 July 1969: “You Africans, you are now your own missionaries” (SECAM 2019, 4, 14). As Andrew Walls has brightly shown, throughout its history, the demographic and geographical centre of Christianity has often experienced periodic shifts. Accordingly, the survival of the Christian faith demonstrates a strong ability to cross geographical and cultural frontiers (Walls 1995, 5–6). That ability and resilience have accounted for its continuous survival despite epochal challenges. For this reason, in the affirmation of Walls, the major feature of contemporary Christianity is the manifestation of the church, which now looks more like that biblical multitude that no one can count (Walls 1995, 24). It is not an overstatement to assert that the African Catholic Church, alongside other churches on the continent, features prominently in that multitude.

Conclusion

Catholicism in Africa has remained vibrant after the fears and preoccupations of the late 1950s and 1960s. Without minimising the laborious years of missionary sacrifices and toils, it is right to acknowledge that the vibrancy and phenomenal growth of the Catholic Church in Africa became accelerated with the indigenisation of its hierarchy. One of the central figures in the history of African Catholicism is Pope Paul VI. It was during his pontificate that global Catholicism began its difficult process of adjustment to the emergence and realities of the young churches from former mission territories in Africa and Asia. In many ways, the 1974 synod of bishops was a springboard for the African hierarchy under the umbrella of SECAM to organise themselves and set pastoral priorities for the churches under their pastoral care and canonical jurisdictions. As this research has shown, in navigating through the not-so-easy roads of the post-independence period that coincided with the establishment of local hierarchies in many parts of Africa, the bishops guided their local churches to a self-affirmation in terms of a collective identity as “the family of God” in Africa. Their theological insights regarding the socio-economic and politico-cultural/religious realities on the continent show the consonance of the bishops with contemporary Catholic Social Teaching.

Through the elaboration of declarations and pronouncements, the bishops led the Catholic Church in Africa in the last fifty years to discover and own its mission of evangelisation, of which human liberation and integral development are constitutive parts.

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