

# *Plantatio Ecclesiae* in Africa: From Tutelage to Maturity

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## Abstract

Wladimir d’Ormesson, a French diplomat at the Vatican, in praise of François Méjan’s 1957 book, *Le Vatican contre la France d’Outre-Mer*, expressed with bitterness and regret that the “civilisation” which French missionaries had helped to spread in mission lands had sadly turned against French interests. “[W]e are showered with ingratitude on all sides. We have spread civilization far and wide,” he wrote. “[A]nd now this civilisation pushes us away in the very name of the doctrine that gave rise to it ... it is a bitter cycle.” The bitterness and regret of d’Ormesson were directed against the Vatican’s new missionary policy on Africa. That policy, understood as *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, was predicated upon indigenisation in terms of allowing African priests to assume positions of authority and leadership in their emerging local churches. It became the bone of contention between the Vatican and some missionary congregations. On the flip side, the desire among some African native clergy, to see the evolution of an African church in an independent Africa, in many instances brought about misunderstanding and tension. This essay intends to highlight the bumpy roads that popped up in attempts to root the local church in the post-missionary era in Africa.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church; indigenisation; native clergy; racism; colonialism

## Introduction

It is now an accepted truism that the Catholic Church in Africa, which issued forth from the womb of the missionary undertakings of the nineteenth century, was born old. During the long phases of tutelage, the young churches in Africa, to a large degree, assimilated some characteristics of the missionary societies that gave birth to them. Those missionaries, in their own turn, mirrored on the continent the “ideal church” of the heydays of a post-Vatican I era. It was half a century that stretched from 1870 to



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1920, during which much of church life and practices such as patterns of worship, ministry, administration and mission became shaped by a rigid neo-scholastic and ultramontane ecclesial mentality of a highly centralised church.<sup>1</sup> As the Latin adage goes, *nemo dat quod non habet* (no one gives what he does not have).

Within the preponderance of missionary vocations at the time, it was almost impossible and unthinkable to imagine between 1840 and 1940 that there could be a time when “indispensable” missionaries might almost not be needed by the same churches they had helped to midwife and nurture. Similarly, on the secular plane, Europe of the mid-nineteenth century exuded a lot of self-confidence in terms of scientific, economic and industrial expansionism, which accorded it a sense of superiority in relation to the rest of the world and in its global domination. All that changed in the waning years of the second half of the twentieth century, precipitated by nationalism and a quest for independence in colonial territories outside of Europe.

In the estimation of Adrian Hasting, the tension between African local clergy and the missionaries in the emerging local churches of the 1960s ought to be located within a wider spectrum of events. This is explainable by the fact that the agitation for the “independence” of the local churches took place within a wider complex web of theological, sociological, political, racial as well as mental changes and challenges. They were unleashed by the continental wind of change that blew across the length and breadth of Africa between 1950 and 1960.<sup>2</sup>

Within the general scheme of events at the time, it is right to note that the Vatican’s policy of *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, with its propensity for indigenisation, fitted so well into the wider continental agitation for self-rule. The stirring was for a faster process of decolonisation in Africa, which accelerated from 1957 and seemed to have reached a crescendo in 1969. Without pretending to cover a vast continent like Africa, this work will cite a few cases across the continent in order to trace the difficult roads travelled by the Catholic Church in Africa to arrive at some level of maturity and autonomy in terms of self-governing.

## The Emergence of an African Clergy

In comparison with Asia, where evangelisation and conversion were mentally difficult but less physically challenging, the evolution of a local clergy in Africa and the Africanisation of the local church was rather slow and shaky in the early years. That truth notwithstanding, it is also pertinent to acknowledge that even in the same Asia, the establishment of a native hierarchy had to wait for almost two centuries until the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878–1903). Prior to his ascent to the papal throne, such a

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1 Adrian Hastings, “In the Field,” in *The Church is Mission*, edited by Edna McDonagh (London, Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969), 86.

2 Hastings, “In the Field,” 86.

## Iheanacho

policy was practically not a priority among Catholic missionaries on that continent.<sup>3</sup> It was Pope Leo XIII who for the first time, through the bull, *Humani Salutis Auctor* of September 1, 1886 officially constituted the episcopal hierarchy in India and Ceylon.

As for the missions in Africa, they had to wait much longer. In the meantime, for most of the nineteenth century, those missions had their charm—an irresistible attraction to lure missionaries of great talents. According to Brockman and Pescantini, “Few missionary works have ever been served by such a collection of ability.”<sup>4</sup> However, on the debit side, such attraction could be described as the sword of Damocles since, in some respects, it helped to retard the emergence of a local church to rest upon the shoulders of its local or native clergy. In principle, almost everyone was in agreement that the raising up of a regular local clergy was vital for the coming of age of the churches in mission territories. However, in actual practice, there were discrepancies between theory and praxis as both often diverged in some instances.

With regard to the history of the Catholic priesthood in Africa, the nomination of Dom Henrique as the first black African bishop in 1518 deserves to occupy a very prominent place in the annals of the Catholic Church in Africa. His elevation to the bishopric by Pope Leo X was epochal. It signalled one of the earliest determinations of the Holy See to ensure that the church took roots in the African soil as quickly as possible. Another important milestone was the episcopal ordination of Monsignor Tobias Ghebragzer of the Ethiopian rite in Rome on June 24, 1788.<sup>5</sup> Those episcopal ordinations of two sons of Africa were isolated experiments because no such episcopal ordination of an African prelate was done again until 1939. The reason was not so much on the grounds of non-availability of native priests, but primarily on account of the reluctance on the part of Rome and the missionaries.

As for the priestly ordinations of Africans during the third and decisive phase of the evangelisation of Africa, the continent got its first three indigenous priests in 1840, thanks to the missionary collaboration between Mother Marie Javouhey and the Holy Ghost Fathers.<sup>6</sup> They were ordained in the seminary of the Holy Ghost Fathers on September 19, 1840: Jean-Piere Moussa (became parish priest of a city church in the island of Goree), David Boilat and Arsène Fridoil.<sup>7</sup> After the first ordinations in 1840, there followed an interval of 12 years before Africa in 1852, got a fourth priest in the

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3 Adrian Hastings, *The World Mission of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), 40.

4 Norbert Brockman and Umberto Pescantini, *A History of the Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004), 162.

5 R. Ritzler and P. Sefrin, eds., *Hierarchia Catholica: Medii et Recentioris (1730–1799)*, Vol. VI (Patavii: Il Messaggero di S. Antonio, 1958), 66; Valentine U. Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking: Prospects of a Local Church in Mission Territories* (Starbrücken: Scholar's Press, 2015), 45.

6 Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 295.

7 R. D. Robert, “The Development of the Local Clergy in Africa,” in *Pontifical Missionary Union, Native Clergy in the Young Churches and the Pontifical Work of St Peter the Apostle* (Rome: International Secretariat, 1976), 86.

## Iheanacho

person of Abbé Lacombe. All four of them were of Senegalese origin, which meant that Senegal held the unique position of producing the first indigenous African priests in the modern era.

It was only in 1874 that Madagascar ordained its first priest with the ordination of Basilide Rahidy. Despite the fact that Senegal, particularly from 1888, had become a Muslim stronghold in West Africa, Jonathan Hildebrandt estimated that there were about 10 local priests in Senegal by 1902.<sup>8</sup> From the detailed research done in this area by R. D. Robert, the following were the names and years of ordination of African priests that can be called the local pioneer clergy:

Abbé Guillaume (1864), Abbé Gabriel Séme and Giraud Sok (1871), Abbé Diouf (1874), Abbé Dione (1881), Abbé Simon Fall (1882). All of them were Senegalese. The next ordination in Madagascar was that of Felix Rabibisoa in 1911. Concurrently, there were ordinations in four other countries: Abbé Louis de Gourlet of French Congo in 1892, Celestin Maonde of San Salvador (Portuguese Congo) in 1892, followed by the ordinations of Abbés Palma and Ferreira in 1897. Senegal came on board again with the ordinations of Abbés Gabriel Sane and Louis César (probably in 1897). To complete the list of these earliest ordinations was Gabon with the ordination of André Raponda-Walker in 1899.<sup>9</sup>

The *annus mirabilis* in the annals of priestly ordinations of African native clergy was 1911 because after that year, priestly ordinations were no longer rare occasions in Africa. For instance, the White Fathers in their Great Lakes Region of East Central Africa (today's Rwanda and Uganda) missions began to record a number of ordinations after the first ordination of two priests of that region in 1913. It was no small feat because, numerically, the White Fathers in that region alone, admitted about 160 seminarians between 1878 and 1913.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that such a positive development was evenly distributed across regions on the continent, as some places still lagged behind. In a region like British West Africa, the emergence of a native clergy never materialised until 1920, when Fr Paul Emechete was ordained as the first Nigerian priest by Bishop Thomas Broderick.<sup>11</sup> The number rose to 10 in 1939. The Gold Coast (Ghana) even had a slower beginning with only three native priests in 1939.<sup>12</sup>

Although French missionaries made up the greater percentage of all Catholic missionary personnel in Africa, French West Africa was the slowest in the ordination of native

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8 Jonathan Hildebrandt, *History of the Church in Africa: A Survey* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1981), 148.

9 The list was culled and adapted from R. D. Robert, "The Development of the Local Clergy in Africa," 86–87. See also Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking*, 44.

10 Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2019), 160.

11 Martin J. Bane, *The Popes and Western Africa: An Outline of Mission History 1460s–1960s* (New York: Alba House, 1968), 59–60.

12 C. P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa 1914–1954*, Vol. 4 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), 196–7.

priests. It is particularly more striking in the case of Senegal, which enjoys the enviable position of having given Africa its first priests in modern times. The tempo became significantly stalled at the dawn of the twentieth century. Sadly, out of about 300 seminarians admitted between 1850 and 1920s in Senegal by the Holy Ghost Fathers, only around 15 seminarians made it successfully to the priesthood.<sup>13</sup> The rest of French West Africa did not register appreciable progress in this regard. For instance, a place like French Equatorial Africa could boast only of a few priests in the 1950s. From the estimation of Elizabeth Foster, there were about 70 native priests in all of French West Africa and Togo in 1952, with the exception of the French Trust Territory of Cameroon which showed great promise with about 75 African priests as at 1952 in relation to 255 missionaries within the same period.<sup>14</sup>

In the southern African region, progress was also slow as the whole region only had a total of 38 native priests from 1919 to 1952. In the opinion of George Mukuka, the reason for such abysmal result was largely due to the hesitation on the part of religious orders and missionary congregations that evangelised the region. According to Mukuka, their hesitation was not in isolation. It was not unconnected with the racial problem that was generally experienced in the region, especially in South Africa where some missionaries doubted if it was opportune to admit black Africans to the priesthood to serve alongside white missionaries.<sup>15</sup> It is mind-boggling to note that for instance the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI), who were the very first to arrive on the southern African shores in 1850, never had an African confrere until 1933 with the ordination of Fr Emmanuel Gregory Mabathoana. He eventually became the first bishop of Leribe Diocese upon its creation in 1952. It is true that Fr Raphael Mohasi had been previously ordained in 1931 as the first Mosotho priest from Lesotho.<sup>16</sup> Putting that aside, it took the Oblates about 83 years (almost a century) to make a breakthrough.

But the OMI's were not alone in that regard. The Congregation of Mariannahill Missionaries did not enthusiastically embrace the pioneering initiatives of Bishop Adalbero Fleischer, who wanted to admit black South Africans into the priesthood. The same was true of the Dominicans, who as late as the 1960s still preferred to admit only whites into their religious order. The Redemptorists did not fare better either, as they also preferred only white candidates for their congregation. Quite astonishing is also the fact that the South African Catholic hierarchy, in 1947, anticipated by a year the South African government's apartheid laws. The bishops, on the urging of Papal Apostolic Delegate, Msgr. Martin Lucas, decided to establish two separate seminaries on racial grounds.<sup>17</sup> The seminary which was opened in Pretoria was designated for white students and the other seminary, established around Mariannahill area, was for black

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13 Foster, *African Catholic*, 161.

14 Foster, *African Catholic*, 156–7.

15 George Mukuka, "The Establishment of the Indigenous Catholic Clergy in South Africa," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXIV, no. 1 (July 2008): 2.

16 <https://dacb.org/stories/lesotho/mabathoana-emmanuel/>, accessed October 18, 2019.

17 Mukuka, "The Establishment of the Indigenous Catholic Clergy," 21.

seminarians. This set-up remained in place until the 1980s when the bishops eventually merged both houses of priestly formation.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to other regions of the continent, Belgian Congo showed the most astronomical increase in the number of local clergy from only two native priests in 1920 to about 77 in 1939. This increase must be placed against the background of the late arrival of Catholic missionaries in the Congo in 1888.<sup>19</sup> The same was also true of the Belgian Trust Territory of Ruanda-Urundi, whose share of native priests increased most significantly from five in 1920 to about 100 local priests in 1950.<sup>20</sup> Contrasting the harmonious transition from a missionary church to an indigenous church with the anarchy that ensued after the independence of the Congo on June 30, 1960, Patrick M. Boyle observed that the Congolese Church was already having “an annual ordination rate of 35 to 40 new African priests on the eve of independence.”<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the Congolese local church, by 1961, could count as many as 450 diocesan priests among its pastoral workforce, with four Congolese native bishops.<sup>22</sup> This meant, as Boyle rightly asserted, the “scattered mission districts of the nineteenth century developed into forty-seven separate dioceses and archdioceses in the 1970s, constituting the largest and most complex national unit of the Catholic Church on the African continent.”<sup>23</sup>

## Inhibiting Factors

It remains to locate the reasons that accounted for the slow emergence of native clergy during the missionary phase of the church in Africa. Again, reasons and circumstances varied from place to place and from region to region. Chief among the factors was the absence of qualified personnel to train candidates for the priesthood. One good example is the frustration once expressed by Fr Jean Hébert with French Africa in mind: “Within a single vicariate it is difficult to find personnel competent to provide the education and instruction of the indigenous clergy.”<sup>24</sup> In that particular instance, it was not the lack of good will nor the commitment on the part of the missionaries, but simply the non-availability of competent personnel.

In another place, the pioneer Holy Ghost Fathers in East Africa were said to have committed large resources to the training of African priests, but with meagre results that were not commensurate to their huge investment. A case in point is their discouraging experience in Zanzibar where 30 years of toil in the preparation of seminarians for the

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18 Mukuka, “The Establishment of the Indigenous Catholic Clergy,” 23.

19 Groves, *The Planting of Christianity*, 196; Stephen Kachama-Nkoy, “Reflections on the Church in the Congo,” *An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 50, no. 199 (Autumn 1961): 298.

20 Groves, *The Planting of Christianity*, 319.

21 Patrick M. Boyle, “Beyond Self-protection to Prophecy: The Catholic Church and Political Change in Zaire,” *Africa Today*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (1992): 54.

22 Kachama-Nkoy, “Reflections on the Church in the Congo,” 298.

23 Boyle, “Beyond Self-protection to Prophecy,” 55.

24 Foster, *African Catholic*, 157.

## Iheanacho

priesthood did not lead to the ordination of a single priest.<sup>25</sup> That bitter experience convinced the Holy Ghost missionaries that several generations might pass before indigenous Africans would become disposed towards the call to the priesthood. A similar complaint was made by Fr Frédéric Levavesseur (1811–1849) (later the vicar apostolic of Madagascar) about the reluctance of young men in Réunion to embrace the Catholic priesthood.<sup>26</sup>

Besides the factors enunciated above, there was also the problem of insufficient funds. Money has always been a major factor in missionary undertaking, especially in terms of expansion together with the myriad of projects associated with Christian missionary undertakings. The *ius commissionis* mission system, abrogated only in 1969, was put in place to ensure a better administration of the missions. It meant that missionary congregations and religious orders, in most cases, bore the greater responsibility of developing mission circumscriptions entrusted to them by the Holy See. To be able to do that, missionary institutes and orders “sent missionaries, collected the necessary funds for them, and endeavoured to build up church communities in their missions.”<sup>27</sup> It is pertinent to recall in this regard the foundation of the Society of St Peter the Apostle in 1889 in Cain, France, by Stephanie and Jeanne Bigard. Its main aim was to help missionaries circumvent the financial costs of training indigenous clergy in mission territories. As its history reveals, the Society of St Peter the Apostle was initially intended to assure economic assistance to Japanese indigenous seminarians. The Society gradually widened the network of its beneficiaries to include other indigenous seminarians in various mission territories under the watchful eye of the Propaganda Fide.

It is also important to note that the establishment of the Society of St Peter the Apostle owes its origin to the suggestion of Monsignor Jules-Alphonse Cousin (Bishop of Nagasaki).<sup>28</sup> The same Society, through its subventions and financial disbursements, played a crucial role in the training of African local clergy. It is not an overstatement to acknowledge that many of the pioneer African native priests were all beneficiaries of the Society of St Peter the Apostle, since the missions in Africa were not buoyant to bear the financial burden of their training. In recognition of its huge contributions, one of the biggest regional seminaries in Nigeria is named Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, in honour of Stephanie and Jeanne Bigard (founders of *Opus Sancti Petri*

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25 Angelo C. Unegbu, *The Institution of the Seminary and the Training of Catholic Priests in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885–1970): A Historical Evaluation* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2018), 34.

26 Unegbu, *The Institution of the Seminary*, 34.

27 Walbert Bühlmann, “Missions and Foreign Money,” in *Missions and Money: Affluence as a missionary problem*, edited by Jonathan J. Bonk (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), x.

28 Alba R. Leone, “La politica missionaria del Vaticano tra le due guerre.” *Studi Storici*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (Gen-Marzo 1980), 125.

## Iheanacho

*Apostoli* that later became known as the Pontifical Mission Society of St Peter the Apostle).<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, the absence of competent personnel and lack of funds were not the only factors adduced for the slow evolution of indigenous African clergy. The sheer lack of interest in some cases on the part of candidates for the priesthood was equally a major constraint. Their lack of enthusiasm might not be overtly unconnected with the long period of seminary training as well as racism and condescension from European missionaries towards African aspirants to the priesthood. In more than one place, the authenticity of the vocation of African seminarians was put into question. In fact, the White Fathers at one point proposed a probationary year especially targeted for their French West African aspirants. The main aim of that probationary year was to verify the genuineness of their vocation. What made the idea seem spurious was the fact that the canon law at the time did not make provision for a probationary period in the training of future priests. The priests of the Society of African Missions (SMA), for their part, opposed the idea on two grounds. They judged it detrimental to local vocation because the period of priestly formation was already long. On another ground, they considered it a racist programme since it was meant for African seminarians alone and not universal in application.<sup>30</sup> In his disapproval of that proposal, Monsignor Joseph-Paul Strebler (vicar apostolic of Lomé), in his 1950 report to the Vatican, shared the apprehension of his African students who detested the idea of a probationary year:

As long as the Church applies exceptional rules to seminarians of color that canon law does not provide for in the case of other races, “probation” will not be valued, but suffered with grumbling. I share their apprehensions because I know the milieu in which this “probation” takes place.<sup>31</sup>

## The Popes and *Plantatio Ecclesiae*

As a concept, the idea of *implantation of the church* was relatively new both in missiology and mission history. Nevertheless, the understanding about founding a local church, to a large extent, hovered in the background in missionary considerations, especially with the establishment of the Propaganda Fide in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV. However, as a term and as a magisterial teaching, *Plantatio Ecclesiae* appeared for the first time in the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> By way of illustration, Propaganda Fide in its famous *Instruction* of 1659 to the first vicars apostolic to the Chinese Kingdoms of Tonkin and Cochin-China, had implied the idea. It instructed the vicars apostolic to know that their “... main duty in the missions will be to form a good and zealous native

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29 <http://www.bigardenugu.org/brief-history.html>, accessed October 23, 2019.

30 Foster, *African Catholic*, 164.

31 Foster, *African Catholic*, 164.

32 Stuart C. Bate, *Missiology Notes* (Cedara: Unpublished, 1995), 51.



## Iheanacho

clergy, capable not merely of administrating a poor mission station or parish, but even of governing big dioceses.”<sup>33</sup>

Equally important was *Neminem Profecto* of November 23, 1845 (addressed to missionary bishops, vicars apostolic and other mission directors). Propaganda Fide drew their attention to two important missionary principles that should underpin their work: (a) indigenous clergy should not be an auxiliary clergy to missionaries; and (b) a serious formation was needed to prepare them for future leadership in the church, including the episcopate.<sup>34</sup> Apart from delineating the spiritual and pastoral finality of missionary activity as that of preaching the message of the gospel to people in mission territories, pontifical documents and those intermittently issued by the Propaganda Fide, cumulatively traced out guiding missionary principles that became only crystallised with the passage of time, and got formalised in papal missionary pronouncements in the twentieth century.

The first of such papal pronouncements was *Maximum Illud*, issued by Pope Benedict XV on November 30, 1919. Undoubtedly, the idea of *Plantatio Ecclesiae* was present in the thoughts of the pope as expressed in that apostolic letter, with strong emphasis on the formation of a local clergy in mission territories. In the same trend of thought was *Rerum Ecclesiae* by Pope Pius XI, published on February 8, 1926. He reiterated the views of his predecessor, insisting that the formation and equipping of local or native clergy were indispensable in the establishment and organisation of a local church. Among other things, the major aim of missionary work, as far as Pope Pius XI was concerned, was unmistakably the foundation and establishment of the church in boundless regions of the world, which again, was not possible without the local clergy (RE no. 21).<sup>35</sup> Thanks to the insistence of both popes and further elaborated by Pope Pius XII, there emerged, as it were, three crucial principles that guided the missionary policies of the Catholic Church, especially from the second half of the twentieth century. They were: a) the establishment of an active Christian community to form the local church; b) a Christian community that must never be isolated from national life as tended to be the case in some missionary quarters; and c) establishment of a native clergy understood as the very essence and ultimate goal of missionary activities.<sup>36</sup>

The clearest enunciation of those principles is found in the missionary documents of Pope Pius XII. With regard to the concept, *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, he first used it in his allocution to Pontifical Mission Societies on June 24, 1944. He underscored the scope of the missions to be that of establishing the church in new territories and to help it cast its roots, so that the church in those places may one day live and develop itself without

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33 E. Goulet, *Holy See and the Missions* (New York: Society for the Propagation of the Faith, 1936), 17.

34 Celso Costantini, *Ricerche d'Archivio sull'Istruzione "De Clero Indigena"* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1947), 75–76.

35 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_28021926\\_rerum-ecclesiae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_28021926_rerum-ecclesiae.html), accessed October 24, 2019.

36 Hastings, *The World Mission of the Church*, 41.

external support. The terminology *mission* is ipso facto withdrawn once the local church is firmly established (par. 2).<sup>37</sup> He further developed his thoughts on *Plantatio Ecclesiae* in *Evangelii Praecones*, published on June 2, 1951. In that encyclical, Pius XII synthesised the thoughts of his two immediate predecessors as laid out in *Maximum Illud* and *Rerum Ecclesiae*. Both encyclicals in modern times have the singular merit of having unambiguously laid down the foundation for understanding the final goal of missionary activity to be that of establishing the church in new territories. By way of perspective, Pius XII identified a two-fold goal of missionary activity, namely: to bring the light of the Gospel to new races and to form new Christians; to establish the church on sound foundations among non-Christian peoples, and to place the local church upon the shoulders of its own native hierarchy (no. 22). Those dual aims of missionary undertaking were couched thus:

The magnanimous and noble purpose which missionaries have is the propagation of the faith in new lands in such a way that the church may ever become more firmly established in them, and as soon as possible reach such a stage of development that it can continue to exist and flourish without the aid of missionary organisations (no. 24).<sup>38</sup>

The same pattern of thought was continued in his letter, *Cupimus Imprimis* of January 18, 1952, addressed to the persecuted church in China under the communist government, and equally in *Fidei Donum* of April 21, 1957. In the former, Pius XII opined that the heralds of the Gospel desired nothing but to bring the light of Christ's teaching to people everywhere and afterwards, "little by little as the number of native clergy increases among you, enable it to reach full maturity, where the aid and collaboration of foreign missionaries will be no longer necessary."<sup>39</sup> In the latter document, with its primary focus on the missions in Africa, Pius XII appreciated the notable increase in ecclesiastical provinces on the continent, sprouting up with a discernible number of African native priests elevated to the episcopate. The acknowledgement of such progress, although somewhat moderate, afforded the pontiff the opportunity to return once again to the theme of *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, and also to fashion out the general broad perimeter within which missionary work in Africa was to operate thenceforth. It was within that same perimeter that he reaffirmed the final goal of missionary activity: "the church should be solidly established among other peoples, and a Hierarchy given to them chosen from among their own sons" (*FD* no. 9).<sup>40</sup>

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37 [https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1944/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_spe\\_19440624\\_opere-missionarie.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1944/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19440624_opere-missionarie.html), accessed October 23, 2019.

38 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_02061951\\_evangelii-praecones.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_02061951_evangelii-praecones.html), accessed October 24, 2019.

39 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apl\\_19520118\\_cupimus-imprimis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-xii_apl_19520118_cupimus-imprimis.html), accessed: October 24, 2019; see also Timothy Connolly, "Pope Pius XII and Foreign Missions," *The Furrow*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (March 1957): 151.

40 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_21041957\\_fidei-donum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_21041957_fidei-donum.html), accessed October 24, 2019.

## Iheanacho

Perhaps, as a caution, he considered it of utmost importance to underscore the point that the establishment of a native hierarchy was not an end in itself; and certainly also not the end of mission or missionary activities (*FD* no. 11).<sup>41</sup> This last point is of vital importance since the conflict that ensued on the heels of the Vatican's policy of ecclesiastical indigenisation in Africa, came as a result of the tension between missionaries and African local clergy. Both groups struggled to adjust to the emerging new way of being a local church, which was not synonymous with being in isolation. For instance, while the missionaries initially resisted the transfer of authority to their African successors, the local clergy for their part (at least some of them), appeared to be in haste to take full control of their nascent local churches. It was more or less comparable to the tension that pulls in two directions: autonomy and centralisation, local and global.

That tension was not limited to the Catholic Church because the decades of 1950s and 1960, even up to the late 1970s, were characterised by African affirmation, which brought European colonisers and missionaries at loggerheads with Africans—whether they be statesmen or churchmen. In spite of that tension, in the explication of Richard Gray, native African Catholic leaders, in contrast to leaders of other churches in Africa, maintained “an umbilical cord” that connected “them firmly to the wider church.”<sup>42</sup> A concrete sign of that connection and the hominess of the church on the African soil was the episcopal consecration of Monsignor André Perraudin (a Swiss priest) on March 25, 1956 by Bishop Aloys Bigirimwami (first vicar apostolic of Nyundo). Monsignor Bigirimwami was the first African bishop appointed in 1952 in the Belgian colonies that comprised Rwanda, Burundi and the Congo. For many, at the time, the episcopal consecration of a European by an African bishop indicated a new beginning, some sort of a reversal of roles and a big symbol of the change that was starting to take place—both in the emerging local churches in Africa and in the larger Catholic world.<sup>43</sup>

## Between Tutelage and Maturity

Unarguably, one of the positive features of contemporary missions in Africa was the eventual presence of native clergy in ecclesiastical leadership positions, because such local presence rendered the church more visible in local contexts and impressed upon it a unique African character. However, it was a gradual process, bumpy at first in many places and it only became accelerated and more systematic in the late 1950s. For instance, the number of African bishops was only two in 1951, with the number increasing to 38 in 1961, reaching 170 by 1973 and only thereafter it was no longer an exception but the norm as the clerical indigenisation in Africa and Asia was

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41 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_21041957\\_fidei-donum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_21041957_fidei-donum.html) accessed October 24, 2019.

42 Richard Gray, *Christianity, the Papacy and Mission in Africa* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 138.

43 Connolly, “Pope Pius XII and Foreign Missions,” 51.

conscientiously pursued and applied by the Holy See.<sup>44</sup> More particularly, in the case of Africa, the insistence on adequate preparation of an indigenous clergy by Popes Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII, ultimately paid off. Such a requirement provided local churches in post-independent Africa with an ecclesiastical leadership that was counted among African elites of the 1960s on the basis of their education, equivalent in quality with what was available across the board in their respective countries.<sup>45</sup>

Although laudable as a policy, the indigenisation process by the Vatican was not without its critics, since it took place during the second half of the twentieth century, which incidentally coincided with the twilight of formal colonialisation in Africa. One of the fierce critics of the Holy See was the French writer, François Méjan (1908–1993) who in 1957 published a book aptly entitled, *Le Vatican contre la France d’Outre-Mer?* As far as Méjan was concerned, the Holy See, through its policy of indigenisation, sided with the nationalists in the colonies and implicitly approved their quest for independence. In the same frame of thought, he interpreted the Vatican’s indigenisation policy of the clergy as “decolonisation” that was directed against France and its overseas interests.<sup>46</sup> Such accusation by Méjan was reminiscent of a similar allegation made against Cardinal Willem van Rossum by a French colonial officer in Vietnam for supporting the elevation of Vietnamese native clergy to the episcopate. In that instance also, Van Rossum—head of Propaganda Fide at the time—was reproved for “flattering” the nationalist sentiments of the Vietnamese and for submitting for papal approval a missionary decree that would give “native clergy equivalent status to European clergy.”<sup>47</sup> Wladimir d’Ormesson, a French diplomat at the Vatican, in praise of François Méjan’s 1957 book, also expressed bitterness and regret directed against the Vatican’s new missionary policy on Africa: “[W]e are showered with ingratitude on all sides. We have spread civilization far and wide,” he wrote. “[A]nd now this civilisation pushes us away in the very name of the doctrine that gave rise to it ... it is a bitter cycle.”<sup>48</sup>

Among African native clergy, the Vatican’s policy of indigenisation did not escape their attention. The debate in the late 1950s, through the 1970s, was hinged around the thorny question about the future of a local church under missionary tutelage and the future of the missionaries themselves. Outstanding in this regard is the influence of the Senegalese writer, Alioune Diop (1910–1980), founder of the intellectual journal *Présence Africaine*, with the aim of promoting African thought. He was connected with the *Négritude* movement led by another Senegalese, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who later became the first president of post-independent Senegal. Senghor was supported in the

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44 Walbert Bühlman, “Passato e futuro dell’evangelizzazione,” in *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum, Vol. III/2: 1815–1972*, edited by J. Metzler (Roma, Freiburg: Herder, 1976), 599; Claude Prudhomme, *Missioni Cristiane e Colonialismo* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2006), 97.

45 Gray, *Christianity, the Papacy and Mission in Africa*, 138.

46 François Méjan, *Le Vatican contre la France d’Outre-Mer?* (Paris: Jouve, 1957).

47 Patrick. J. N. Tuck, *French Catholic Missionaries and the Politics of Imperialism in Vietnam (1857–1914): A Documentary Survey* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1987), 303–4.

48 Cited by Foster, *African Catholic*, 5.

*Négritude* movement by Aimé F. Césaire and Léon G. Damas. Alongside the *Négritude* movement, *Présence Africaine* provided a platform for native priests (particularly in Francophone Africa) to voice out their views in demanding for the right to speak and to participate in the process of evangelisation and “de-Europeanisation” of the emerging local churches in Africa.<sup>49</sup>

A milestone was reached in 1956 with the publication of the book, *Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent*, which raised a lot of dust for its critical stance on missionary activities, the church and the place of the African local clergy within the organisational structure of various African local churches. Although the book was somewhat belatedly known in Anglophone Africa, its popularity and influence in French Africa were by no means a small accomplishment. It galvanised French Africa to demand the “emancipation” of their nascent churches from missionary tutelage. It is within this prism that the famous mantra of Cardinal Joseph Malula, “A Congolese Church in a Congolese State” ought to be inserted. In the hazy days of the era of independence in Africa, the ecclesial, social and political contexts were all converged and close to one another.

In the same optic, one of the offshoots of the “emancipation” outcry was the question posed in 1967 by the Cameroonian theologian, Meinrad Pierre Hegba, “Émancipation d'église tutelle?” He expanded the same question in 1976 and published it with the title, *Émancipation d'église sous tutelle. Essai sur l'ère post-missionnaire*. In the mindset of Hegba, a new missionary era meant the emancipation of the African Church from “spiritual neo-colonialism” perpetuated by Western missionaries.<sup>50</sup> A similar pattern of thought was present in another Cameroonian theologian, Fabien E. Boulaga, who published an article in 1974 with the title, “La demission.” Responding to his own hypothetical and polemical question directed against missionaries, “What to do?” Boulaga posited this answer: “Let Europe and America evangelize themselves as a matter of priority. Let them plan the withdrawal in good order of the missionaries from Africa.”<sup>51</sup> It was largely assumed in those decades that church structures in mission areas were specifically designed to render missionaries indispensable. Those structures were considered as helping to perpetuate the continuous presence of missionaries instead of accelerating their replacement by the local clergy.

Such an assumption was not altogether baseless. Pope Pius XI, in *Rerum Ecclesiae*, had wisely admonished missionaries to “avoid building churches or edifices that are too sumptuous and costly as if you were erecting cathedrals and episcopal palaces for future dioceses” (*RE* no. 31).<sup>52</sup> The experience of pioneer African bishops was the constant

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49 Paulin Pouconta, “Meinrad Pierre Hegba: Theologian and Healer,” in *African Theology in the 21st Century: The Contribution of the Pioneers*, Vol. 2, edited by Bénézet Bujo and Juvénal I. Muya (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 84–5.

50 Pouconta, “Meinrad Pierre Hegba: Theologian and Healer,” 73.

51 Pouconta, “Meinrad Pierre Hegba: Theologian and Healer,” 76.

52 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_28021926\\_rerum-ecclesiae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_28021926_rerum-ecclesiae.html), accessed October 24, 2019.

worry about the financial sustainability of their dioceses, as building projects and other inherited structures tended to drain their limited resources, becoming a big burden for the nascent local churches. It is not surprising that someone like Hegba in his dexterity even proposed that African local churches should abandon social works like schools and hospitals that often required a large personnel and huge capital in order to run smoothly. In his view, the giving up of such personnel-and-resource-draining projects was part of the emancipation of the local churches from the worries of material administration bequeathed to them by the missionaries.<sup>53</sup> It was also a sign of their coming of age, meaning that they could think and decide for themselves in terms of what was workable or not, and not simply follow what was handed over to them.

Along the same line was the problem of mental adaptation in terms of pastoral practices and reciprocity. As Adrian Hastings once maintained with regard to the question of reciprocity, it is not always the number of baptised Christians, nor the number of native bishops that is necessarily indicative of the success of a mission. It is rather their active participation in the mutual giving and receiving within the universal church instead of being passive recipients of foreign “charity.”<sup>54</sup> As the argument went in the late 1970s, the maturity of local churches implied that missionary institutes and congregations were obliged to provide assistance to young churches without strings attached, in the form of seeking to control or dictate to them, for that would impede or undermine their true character as local churches. In the context of the theological debate of the 1960s and 1970s, the Dutch mission historian, Arnulf Camps, proffered the idea that missionary activity should not be “the bearer of borrowed structures” but as a matter of necessity, must adapt.<sup>55</sup> A similar concern was raised by Kalenga Matembele, who maintained the view that “the real implantation of the church” was yet to take place in Africa because the then emerging church was “merely a faded copy of the European Church.”<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

An Arab proverb says: “Men resemble their times more than they do their fathers.” As heirs of their milieu, the missionaries replicated in Africa the idea of church and mission that was in vogue in the nineteenth century. In that epoch, the thought of a local clergy, emerging one day to take the place of missionaries, was but a distant reality. Equally distant was the concept of *Plantatio Ecclesiae*, which developed gradually to become an operational catch phrase in papal missionary policy, especially from the second half of the twentieth century.

Similarly, the Catholic Church in contemporary Africa passed through a transitional phase from the missionary era to the slow emergence of its native or local clergy. That

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53 Pouconta, “Meinrad Pierre Hegba: Theologian and Healer,” 71.

54 Hastings, *The World Mission of the Church*, 46.

55 Arnulf Camps, “Missionary Activity and Borrowed Structures,” *Concilium*, Vol. 13 (New York, Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1966), 126.

56 See, Walbert Bühlman, *Mission on Trial—Addis Ababa, 1980: A Moral for the Future from the Archives of Today* (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1978), 48–9.

transition was quickened after the Vatican intensified its missionary policy, which it anchored on the principle of clerical indigenisation. That policy did not escape the scrutiny of a critic like François Méjan, who accused the Vatican of colluding with African nationalists against the colonial interests of France. And for some African theologians like Meinrad Pierre Hegba, Fabien E. Boulaga and a prelate like Cardinal Malula, the indigenisation policy was slow and did not go deep enough to make way for truly independent local churches to evolve everywhere on the continent. For its part, the Vatican pursued its policy with caution and gradualism insisting at times that indigenisation did not imply complete withdrawal or the end of missionary collaboration.

In some ways, the Vatican's policy of indigenisation carried the historical scars impressed upon the missionary memory of the Catholic Church in Asia. Those scars were residues of the experiences in Japan and China, where the late formation of a native clergy precipitated the ruins of those missions when persecutions were unleashed against them. Those painful experiences hunted the collective missionary memory of the Catholic Church so much that it was not prepared to risk a repeat of them in Africa. It therefore drove the Vatican, through the Propaganda Fide, not to leave any stone untouched in ensuring that the churches in Africa were not deprived of their own native hierarchy. Against the background of the multiple changes that took place everywhere around the continent between the 1950s and 1970s, the Vatican considered it a matter of urgency to hasten the application of its policy of clerical indigenisation in Africa. That policy, as it were, acted as a rudder, and helped the local churches to navigate through the labyrinth of tutelage to arrive at some modicum of maturity.

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