

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN AFRICA IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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### Introduction

As we approach the third millennium there is a growing anxiety in all spheres of human existence. This is because:

*Humanity has witnessed such phenomenal changes and transformation as never has been known to take place within such a short period of time in recorded history.<sup>1</sup>*

Governments are making policies towards the celebration of the new millennium based on the belief that every aspect of life will be improved. Hence, one hears things like "Health for all by the year 2,000. Housing for all by year 2,000. Education for all by the year 2,000." Those who have not enjoyed the good things in the passing millennia hope for better in the next. The Tablet reports that the British Government is approaching the celebration by committing vast amounts of money and raising buildings, Computers have become more sophisticated to guard against the "millennium bug."

The Church above all has been making a lot of preparations for the past two years for this great celebration. That is why it is possible to talk about the role of the Church in Africa in the Third Millennium. The Pope's ambitious millennium preparations are not hidden. "He invites people to think spiritual thoughts, light candles on the anniversary of the birth of Christ and the New Christian Era."

Churches are seeking support for a two minutes silence, nationwide, just before the midnight on 31<sup>st</sup> Dec, 1999.<sup>2</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury does not mind sharing the Eucharistic communion with other members of the Church as a bold sign of the millennium; but late Cardinal Hume added, "only if they believe in the real presence of Christ. "The Church in Africa prepares in a special way to celebrate with the mother Church:

*It will be impossible to discuss and display the changes our society has undergone in the past thousand years without focusing on all aspects.<sup>3</sup>*

This calls for a great celebration and reflection. The Church as we know has played an important role in the development of the African Continent

which was, "mistreated, misrepresented, misinterpreted, and misreported outside itself."

Without the works of the Church in Africa... the development of the Continent might have delayed twenty, thirty or more years.<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of these, the Church continues to wax in strength, making a lot of impart in political, economic, social, cultural and religious spheres, though not without difficulty. Within these accelerated pace of history, the Church has opened up immense series of new problems calling for new endeavour of analysis and synthesis. Having lived in Africa for this long and conversant with her problems – what then will be the role of the Church in the next millennium? This and other related questions are the crux of this write-up, why the Church grew reside in the past millennium? And how has colonization affected the growth of the Church in Africa? At the end we will give a proposal of the role the church needs to play in the next millennium.

### **The Advent of Christianity in Africa**

The conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch is the longest section in the New Testament that tells about an African and the Church (Acts. 8:26-38). Africa is not a newcomer to Christianity. Christianity was already established in Africa in the middle of the second century. The Church in Egypt claims the Evangelist Mark as its founder. The Church in Africa has martyrs as early as 180 AD (Felicity and Perpetua). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries great centers of learning flourished in Africa:

*The school of Alexandria produced a great number of eminent scholars who were remarkable for their achievements.*<sup>6</sup> (St. Augustine, Cyprian of Carthage).

The advent of the Church in Africa may be considered under three periods. The first period began when the vibrant Church in North Africa in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries stood with its head held high. The Church at this time was steeped in theological controversies. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century when Roman rule was weakening in the frontiers of Africa, the Europeans arrived to misrule the continent for a century. When the Arabs came with their newly founded religion 'Islam' in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Church in Africa was already declining. It was soon replaced by the faith of the new rulers in North Africa.

The second period began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Portuguese explorers and traders accompanied by missionaries came to West Africa: The Church at this time failed because it came under the wing of an

imperial power that was resented by the people it sought to rule. This saw the rise of African Independent churches.

The third and the most important period is the recent period of the Church's history in Africa which began in the 1850s and continues to present. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church witnessed one of the greatest missionary awakenings in history. Many new congregations and missionary associations were started with the aim of evangelizing Africa, the fruits of whose labour is the African Church of today.

### **The Church in Africa in the Last two Millennia**

Nathaniel Ndiokwere quotes:

The first millennium was the millennium of Christian unity, there were schisms, but there was still unity of East and West. The second millennium was the millennium of great divisions. The millennium of unification. Now we are precisely at the end, we could rediscover a new unity through a free common reflection.<sup>7</sup> The African Church in the past had to be reviewed, reexamined and reflected upon before we can determine what role the Church will play in the coming millennium. Moreover, what affects the universal Church affects the Church in Africa which is but a part of the whole. In the early days of missionary activity in Africa, it was taken for granted that Africans were some how an inferior species of human life. Today, the same Africans are seen as people innately religious, depositories with the rest of humankind of God's image and revelation.

Despite the fact that religious divisions in Africa were imported by the colonial powers, it effected the growth of the Church. Colonization brought an end to slavery in African, so that people to be evangelized no longer had any fear of being taken away from their homes. Colonization brought an end to the large numbers of inter-tribal wars. Boundaries were established for each tribe and the colonial masters taught people how to live peacefully.

Thus colonization is an important factor that influenced the missionary activity in Africa. Though many times (in Northern African) it dictated where missionaries and Churches could not-work – especially Muslim colonies. This hurt the missionaries' efforts. Also because of European rivalries- Germans did not wish French or English missionaries to work in their colonies and vice versa. This caused many missions to close down between 1885-1914. Additionally, the European traders and businessmen brought many evils and vice with them from Europe and

introduce them to Africa, such as materialism, smoking, strong alcoholic drinks.

1. Above all two important factors might be said to have influenced the coming of the missionaries:
2. The "Great Revival" of 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholicism in Europe and America, as a result of which many young committed Christians were ready and willing to carry the gospel to new areas of Africa.
3. New discoveries in the area of medicine with new drugs to treat tropical diseases. As a result, malaria and yellow fever no longer killed missionaries. Since then the Church has been making transformations in families, in the day to day living of people and communities in Africa. The good news wrought changes in people's lives. Fear of witches and spirits disappeared to a new life of joy and freedom. The colonial government would not have been able to build all the schools established by the missionaries. Thus, the educational systems of Africa owe a great debt to the Church for this service.
4. The Church established hospitals and introduced new treatments to eradicate ancient disease, such as leprosy and malaria fever. Fewer people died in childhood; more people could live a healthy life. In the area of agriculture, new farming systems were taught, new crops were introduced and methods of production developed. So that the amount of food grown by people increased. The people were also taught better ways of tailoring and blacksmithing.

Destiny has forced the Church to play a greater role in the current political awakening taking place in most countries. "But why did the task of coordinating healthy political changes fall to the Church? One possible answer is: because the Church has always been identified with justice and human rights. The Church had become the hope and inspiration of the people in the past years. What has been happening in most African countries show that we have not moved away from the system of colonialism. Military rulers feel power belongs to them. This means the Church is an alternative. People hope that in the Church they will be free enough to be able to think of new ways to help themselves.

The second Vatican Council was an important event in the past two millennia that affected the Church in Africa. Vatican II (1962-1965) opened the door to the understanding of the Church as "all are people of God." Together as one, they read the signs of times. Today the Church in

Africa is rediscovering its roots and its cultural values, so that it can fit in the message of the gospel. Now what is needed is the creativity of the early Church so as to go beyond superficial adaptation. To further articulate and implement proposals of Vatican II, the African Bishops met in Rome in 1994 to look at the challenges facing the African Church.

It concluded that at the end of the second millennium the Church has to contend with many challenges, such as:

1. Independent Churches in Africa have sprung up because of the unsatisfying performance of the established churches. These newer churches are flexible and open to change. Their leaders try to offer their members what the established Churches so often failed to offer them- the joyful experience of togetherness and of being uplifted with no barriers between leaders and laity, men and women. They answer the psychological and spiritual expectations and needs of their followers.
2. The lack of inculturation has kept our churches European which impedes an easy approach to the African mind and heart.
3. Local Churches depend on their catechists for instructions and the celebration of liturgy, and some of these persons are not well educated in matters of faith.
4. The place of women in the Churches and society has been a delicate one. If women have lower status in many parts of the world, this is even truer in Africa. The Churches face the challenge of addressing this problem, because no factor has influenced the development of indigenous women in Africa more than the contributions of women religious from Europe and America.
5. In the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, leaders of the Church in Africa have spoken out increasingly about social justice. This is a welcome development in the continent where the disparity between rich and poor, powerful and powerless has been so great. Social inequalities are on their increase threatening the lives of believers.
6. Nobody can deny that there is a growing tension of confrontation, especially when Moslem Fundamentalists come face to face with Christian fundamentalists. Dialogue appears only lip-service and Islam has for long posed a challenge to the Church in Africa in the past years.

7. Case of witchcraft and occultism have threatened the lives of members in Africa, which make them transfer from one Church to the other seeking deliverance.

8. The question of polygamy has long been a problem in converting some Africans, this also challenges the existence of the Church in Africa for a long time.

9. The proliferation of churches creates a new situation and danger not only for the Church but also our African Heritage.

10. Africa has a terrible legacy of war, capitalizing on existing divisions which have been exploited and engineered by the "Ogas" in power.

The challenges are immense. The church has been trying to combat them and make the gospel at home for the Africans. However, it is said that, "youthful stage is a hopeful stage." The Church is still young in her missionary endeavor, that means there is a lot of hope that things will get better in the next millennium.

### **The Role of the Church in the Third Millennium**

Society has become more complex and so people are more complex. The task before the Church is one of extreme difficulty and delicacy. The challenges facing her are numerous as we have observed. The Church faces a continent in ferment. Paganism enjoys resurgence as it assimilates Christian elements. Islam remains indomitable and carries on successful proselytism. Materialism has penetrated the educated classes and the youth. Nationalism, often implicated with racism, continues to provoke political storms injurious or dangerous for mission.

It is clear that the Church has become present everywhere in Africa. This is seen in the development and erection of new dioceses, nomination of Africans to the hierarchy of the Church, increasing ordination to the priesthood and religious profession. Consequently, the synod of Bishop for Africa was timely in that the Church meditated on her nature and mission, and on the authenticity of her witness to Christ in the light of third millennium. In *Ecclesia In Africa*, Pope John Paul II exhorts:

*For all the people of Africa the best preparation for the new millennium consist in a firm commitment to implement with great fidelity the decisions and orientations which ... I present in this exhortation. The are decisions and orientations which can be traced back to genuine heritage of the Church's teaching and discipline and in*

*particular to second Vatican Council, the main source of our inspiration for the special assemble in Africa."*

It follows then that the synod was a prerequisite; by that process the Church in Africa would conform to its mission of the people of God according to the document of Vatican II. The declaration by the Catholic Institute in Africa warns that "if the Church is to be truly part of the African scene, the people have to be given the chance to take full responsibility for the inculturation of Gospel message into their lives; so much so that they feel the urgency of passing it onto their fellow Africans.

Without this personal acceptance of and lifelong engagement to the gospel message, the Church in Africa today could experience a fate similar and even worse than that experienced in North Africa during the Islamic invasion. Speaking to Bishops at Kampala, in Uganda in 1969 to challenge the Church in Africa to cultivate its soul, the Pope said, "You may and you must have an African Christianity."

The Church in Africa in the next millennium should be an incarnated Church, especially in the hearts of the African people. If this is to be possible, it means that the third millennium is beginning of yet another journey. It is not the end of history as many have in mind. As the saying goes, "History repeats it-self," to avoid past mistake the Church has to play her role.

The theme for the Africa Synod- "The Church in Africa and her Evangelizing mission towards the year 2,000: You will be my witness" (Acts 1:8)- hammered seriously on the role the Church is expected to play in the next millennium. Amongst them and others which we deem necessary are:

The Inculturation of African values, symbols, music and dance is to be pursued. An uninculturated Church will not survive on African soil.

- The Church is expected to foster religious dialogue, especially with Islam, and ecumenism with members of the Independent Churches.
- The question of Sharia law of recent poses challenge to Church role.
- The Church must seek justice and peace for the marginalized and the voiceless.
- The Church to update and expand the use of the means of social communication. This will enhance the qualities of social

communication inside the Church and promote evangelization and deepen the faith.

- In matters concerning polygamy, position of women in the church and society, the church should work towards an emergence of African rites and educate people on the plight of women.
- The Church in Africa should gradually reduce its dependence on foreign resource, while admitting poverty and enhancing self-reliance.
- She should also encourage the permanent Diaconate so that the Eucharist will be accessible to the local Churches.
- Priority should be given to the development of small Christian communities.
- Evangelization should be taken as a matter of primary concern.
- The "People of God" model of the Church should be structured in such a way that it becomes evident in Africa.
- The impact of Christianity in the early periods was felt strongly because of missionary schools, hospitals, agricultural policies, etc. these can still serve as a means of primary evangelization.
- The laity should be encouraged to read the scriptures which are the mirror of the Christian tradition.
- In the face of mass exodus from the Church and negligence of sacraments, the Church has the role of re-catechizing her faithful on her doctrines, not allowing people to only memorize doctrines without understanding them.
- The youths are the future Church of Africa. They should be brought up in such a way that they will later take up leadership roles without problems.
- Programmers for the disabled should also be encouraged.
- Those helping the priest and sister such as cooks, house helpers should be ensured good payment.

The Church in Africa is still in the vigour of her youth, she has a leading role to play in the mission of Christ-by expressing in her life the values of the past with the prophecy of the future. The New Millennium is dawning, we are counting days, the Church has to overcome a fairly widespread attitude of passivity and superficiality. Priests should depend less on their Bishops, religious on their superiors, and people on their priest. Every local Church, family, diocese has the gift to take full

responsibility to witness to the gospel, for the church is the church of Christ and must be built from within in the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

At the Eve of the new Millennium and deep historical changes, history is the source of inspiration and only those who are rooted in the past can face the future with confidence. This triggers a new life style, self-consciousness and willingness to be active as indeed the third millennium is looked upon with a lot of expectations.

The church of tomorrow will be different in appearance, structure and spirituality from the Church of the past 2,000 years”

The African church of the third Millennium is going to be a dialogic, prophetic and mature church. We hold the key to our future. The Church of the future will assume a new form. Perhaps the most contentious conclusion to what the future church of the third Millennium will look like is that the church will be a HOPEFUL CHURCH: “For hunger that has hope never kills.”

### **ENDNOTES**

1. George Ehusani, *An Afro-Christian Vision "Ozovehe" towards a more Humanised World*. (Ibadan, Nigeria: The Ambassador Publications, 1992) p.5.
2. "No Faith in the Third Millennium Dome." (Tablet: 10 January 1998) P.61.
3. Ibid, P.61
4. Ehusani, OP. Cit, p.ix.
5. Mabel Kataweire, *What is the Mission of the Church in promoting Civilization?* Fesac Issue 47,1996, p 28.
6. Nathaniel Ndiokwere. *The Third Millennium Church: The Church that will Survive*, (Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publications, 1998) p.88.
7. Ibid, p.272.
8. Michael E. Bassey, "The Church in Africa and Evangelization in View Of the jubilee In

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ENDNOTES

1. George Eghuzani, An Afro-Christian Vision "Ozovoh" towards a more Humanised World (Ibadan, Nigeria: The Ambassador Publications, 1992) p. 2.
2. "We Point in the Third Millennium Down" (Tablet 10 January 1998) p. 61.
3. Ibid. p. 61.
4. Eghuzani, Op. Cit. p. ix.
5. Mabel Katsweire, What is the Mission of the Church in promoting 'civilisation', Pessac Issue 47, 1996, p. 28.
6. Nathaniel Ndiokwer, The Third Millennium Church: The Church that will Survive (Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publications, 1998) p. 28.
7. Ibid. p. 27.
8. Michael E. Bassay, "The Church in Africa and Evangelization in a New