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Editorial

Dear Reader,

The first SEDOS Bulletin of the year 2017 carries as its central theme mission on the continent of Africa. Different authors, most of them with African roots, have blessed us with their contributions.

The first of them is Daniel Ihunnia who has just finished a doctorate on missiology at the Pontifical Urbanian University. He wants to make us aware through his article that more and more missionaries are coming from the African continent and that they are changing the face of mission; a mission that is not just simply a “reversed mission”. Africans have also become “missionaries to themselves”. The second article, written by Flaminia Elia, retells how great Western and African scholars on the Study of Religion perceived African spirituality. The leading themes in all their studies to understand African spirituality focus on: “life”, “vital force”, “powers”, “vital union”. Everything is felt as united like a spider’s web. If you pull one thread of the web, everything else will move with it. Therefore, African spirituality is not so interested in what to belief, as in how to live the “human aspirations” as Elia calls it.

The first two authors have mentioned in their writings the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae munus (Africa’s commitment)* of 19 November 2011. Especially in the next article, Bernadette Clara Alvine Ayo Mbarga takes as her theme forgiveness and she develops it further in light of the role African women play in the process of reconciliation. We therefore found it opportune to publish the first part on forgiveness.

The whole document can be found on the blog of AMECEA: <http://africeamunus.blogspot.it>

Our last African author, Francis Perry Azah, discusses the impact of the widowhood rite on Ghanaian women. This dehumanizing practice is injurious to them and infringes upon their fundamental human rights and it has to be stopped. He therefore calls upon the Christian community to take action against it. The Church has already adopted a more human rite to replace it.

Looking at mission today from the perspective of Africa gives us many aspects to think about. These articles touch on some of them: the challenge of a mission *ad intra*, inculturation, African rituals and Christian ethics, and reconciliation in an African context. Daniel Ihunnia also treats aspects such as: “mission and money”; “solidarity with our families”. The upcoming SEDOS Residential Seminar at Nemi carries as its theme “*Economy in the Service of Mission*” and it will deal more in depth with the financial aspect of doing mission, and the vow of poverty (see NEWS).

Daniel O. Ihunnia, *MSP*

How Africa is changing the face of mission

The role of the Missionary Society of St. Paul Nigeria (MSP)

Introduction

Almost two centuries have now passed since the Christian faith made a definitive presence in most parts of Africa. With the exception of the ancient churches in Egypt and some other outposts along the coast, contemporary Christianity in Africa traces back to the 19th century¹. It however, became a major force to reckon with in the 20th century, when questions of national independences, anthropological and ecclesial identities came into vogue². Since then, that free spirit of religious outreach, which no one thought existed in the continent, has now been unleashed in the universal Church. We are talking about a vibrant missionary energy originating from the then mission-lands of Africa. Although the extent of this new energy was not immediately predictable, the increasing number of African missionaries overseas has made the continent indisputably significant in global evangelization. Walbert Bühlmann had written about what he described as a *third church* by which Christianity's center of gravity makes a historical shift to the southern hemisphere creating an *outstanding opportunity* for the faith³.

In a way, understanding this outstanding opportunity is an important step towards comprehending the new face of mission in today's world. This is why we hope to explore in this article, the evangelizing efforts of the Missionary Society of St. Paul, Nigeria (popularly known as MSP). Its apostolic life overseas will throw light on how Africa is helping to re-shape

the face of the Church and its mission in the 21st century. The MSP is a genuinely African missionary enterprise. Established in 1978 by the Nigerian Episcopal Conference⁴, it is a particular success story of the Nigerian Church in history. This article argues that Africa (and indeed the rest of the developing world) is the new factor in missionary determinations but the question is whether the Church really recognizes what is happening.

Paul VI and the African Missionary Development

To view the increase in the number of African missionaries as a mere sociological issue is reductionist because there should be more to it. It is also hard to conclude that Africa is now a self-sufficient missionary powerhouse. However, if we traced the history of faith development in Africa, we may discover that this phenomenon is part of a larger project of God, in which Africa may have been budgeted to carry on the light of the Gospel in a reverse mission. To understand this, we have to recall the pontificate of Paul VI (Giovanni Battista Montini, 1963-1978), who particularly sensed the emergence of a missionary energy in Africa and created the space for its flourishing. From the 1960s therefore, he stands out significantly as part of the story of African missionary development. Just after one year of his pontificate, Paul VI canonized twenty-two Ugandan martyrs in Rome (1964), affirming that Africa is an emergent force in global Christian witnessing.

Vatican II (1962-1965) played a major role in the new orientations that transformed African

¹ Cf. J. BAUR, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, Paulines Publication Africa, Nairobi 1994, 103.

² Cf. F. A. OBORJI, *Trends in African Theology since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation*: LEBERIT SRL PRESS, ROMA 2005, 52 – 64.

³ Cf. W. BUHLMANN, *The Coming of the Third Church*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1978, 22.

⁴ Cf. J. BAUR, *Op. cit.*, 272.

Christianity. However, within the same period, two other unforgettable moments influenced the quick development of the missionary spirit in Africa. The first was the inauguration of a continental episcopal organization, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). The second was the historic visit of Pope Paul VI to Kampala, Uganda, in July 1969, making him the first ever Pontiff to set foot on the African soil⁵. During this visit, the Pope challenged all the local churches of Africa to assume their rightful missionary identity. According to him, “*By now, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves*”. Detecting the missionary potential of Africa, Paul VI prayed for the grace of “fertilizing the good seed and stirring up the human and Christian energies” inherent in the genius of African vocations for both spiritual and temporal fulfillment. He indeed stated that Africa would soon be capable of bringing to the universal Church “the precious and original contribution of negritude” which the Church of Christ urgently needs at this particular moment in history⁶. Although the speech focused more on the evangelization of Africa, the perspective of a global missionary flourishing was prophetically inherent and this makes us consider Paul VI as really, a true prophet of the third millennium⁷.

Paul VI was a Pope of dialogue and ecumenism, a pilgrim of the future and an expert of humanity. His vision of the church in relation to the developing world was that of hope. For a Pontiff at that moment in history to call Africans “missionaries” was already a brilliant revolution. Before he was Pope, he visited several African countries including, Ghana, Sudan, Kenya, Congo, Rhodesia, South Africa, and Nigeria in 1962⁸. Paul VI became the leader of the Christian community in a season when self-preservation was the Church’s dominant notion

of mission. The assumption was that only the Churches in the northern hemisphere could send missionaries to the south⁹. Paul VI saw a different reality. It becomes easy to see why his life and teachings illuminate the Church’s missionary pathway. He encouraged African churches to enter the hermeneutic of history, remembering those who came from outside to evangelize them. Such a history he believed *confers on the local Church the mark of its authenticity and nobility, its mark as apostolic*.

“That history is a drama of charity, heroism and sacrifice, which makes the African Church great and holy from its very origins. It is a history, which still continues, and must continue for a long time to come, even though you Africans are now assuming its direction... There must now be associated to and following upon the impulse given to the faith by the missionary action of foreign countries, an impulse arising from the heart of Africa itself”¹⁰.

An impulse from the heart of Africa

An actualization of what Pope Paul VI described as “*an impulse from the heart of Africa*” is the establishment of the Missionary Society of St Paul, Nigeria. Between the 1960s and 1970s, things were fast evolving in the socio-cultural, economic and political landscapes of Africa. Most countries got their independence from colonialism. These countries were engrossed with the challenges of building up their newly liberated nations. Nigeria, which became independent in 1960, had just emerged from a bloody civil war (1967 -1970). The war broke out when the mostly Christian tribes of the East and Southeast wanted a new state of Biafra citing marginalization by the ruling North. Millions of the “Biafrans” died during this war, especially children of starvation. The post-war period was however, suffused with fears of genocide against the “Biafrans” that even Pope Paul

⁵ C. K. O. NWOSU, *Cardinal Dominic Ekanem and the Growth of the Catholic Church in Nigeria*, The Ambassador Publications, Nigeria 2012, 321.

⁶ Cf. PAUL VI, “Homily” The Eucharistic Celebration at the conclusion of the Symposium organized by the Bishops of Africa, Kampala, Uganda 31 July 1969.

⁷ Cf. E. BROGLIONI, *Paolo VI: Profeta del Terzo Millennio*, Editrice VELAR, Italia, 2008.

⁸ POPE PAUL VI, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Paul_VI retrieved, 8 May 2016

⁹ Cf. G. COLZANI, “La Visione Missionaria Nell’Evangelium Nuntiandi” (Paper presentation at the Parish of S. Antonino, Concesio 25 Ottobre 1996), in *1897 Concesio 1997 1 Centenario della nascita di Giovan Battista Montini: Atti*, Parrocchia S. Antonino M, Zona Pastorale XXIII di Paulo VI Comune di Concesio, Brescia 1999, 29-36.

¹⁰ PAUL VI, “Homily”, Op. Cit.

VI was prompted to caution the Nigerian government against any forms of reprisals¹¹. Imaginably, the accumulation of serious ethnic sentiments resulted in mistrust and insecurity around the country. This was not a good prospect for an emerging nation like Nigeria, abundantly blessed with natural resources.

A lot was also happening in the religious sphere. The Second Vatican Council had initiated reforms in the church and Africans were exploring possible ways to implement the new conciliar proposals. Inculturation was a major issue of these reforms. However, new firebrand evangelicalism was also gradually making its way into Africa (into Nigeria in particular) mostly from North America, carrying with it fundamentalist notions that would further divide peoples and families. This still poses a huge ecumenical challenge for mission in Nigeria today¹². Hence, the socio-religious atmosphere was tensed-up. One can figure how such an atmosphere hit directly on the heart of the Christian community in Nigeria. Many groups of goodwill wanted to be part of a solution to the challenges facing the nation, but how did the Church being the sign and instrument of God's kingdom respond?

The church's response during critical moments shows how well she understands her mission in context. It was the Church's prophetic responsibility to guide Nigeria made up of diverse cultures back to the right track of nationhood. Indeed, this provided the Catholic bishops in Nigeria an occasion to think of possible, concrete ways to promote unity, stability and national reconciliation. In a statement released in 1970, just as the Nigerian civil war ended, the bishops enunciated the preparedness of the Catholic Church to cooperate fully with the government and other non-governmental agen-

cies "to pool all our available resources, spiritual, moral, physical and financial for the relief of suffering and the building of a better nation". They pledged to dedicate themselves to the most Christian fruit of peace which is reconciliation"¹³. Also in a memorandum of February 1972, the bishops reiterated the role of the Church in resolving the Nigerian social problems:

"The Church in Nigeria must therefore spend herself to the utmost as a matter of urgency to cooperate with the Federal and State Government agencies, with other religious and civil organizations to find adequate means of establishing and reinforcing in our pluralistic society a true spirit of unity, lasting peace and fraternal charity... Religion is a unifying force and not a divisive one. The Church must cooperate to work for unity and peace and do nothing to be identified with tensions and divisions"¹⁴.

For the bishops to be involved in national issues would however, touch on politics, which has never been an easy matter for the Church in Africa, always accused of meddling into politics¹⁵. Pope John Paul II had asserted that, "the decisions which either accelerate or slow down the development of peoples are really political in character"¹⁶. Hence, there was this strategy by the bishops to form together priests from the different geo-political zones of Nigeria. It was an impulse triggered by the reality and need of the time. It was first nursed in the heart of the then Bishop Dominic Ekandem (1917-1995), who would later become Cardinal¹⁷. This gave



¹¹ Cf. C. K. O. NWOSU, Cardinal Dominic Ekandem and the Growth of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, Op. cit. 197.

¹² Cf. N. NDIOKWERE, The African Church Today and Tomorrow: Prospects and Challenges, Vol. 1, Effective Key Publishers, Onitsha, Nigeria 1994, 6 -7.

¹³ Cf. P. SCHINELLER, (ed.), The Voice of the Voiceless: Pastoral Letters and Communiques of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria 1960- 2002, Daily Graphics Nigeria Limited, Ibadan 2002, 56.

¹⁴ Ibid. 61.

¹⁵ Cf. P. A. KALILOMBE, Doing Theology at the Grassroots: Theological Essays from Malawi, Mambo Press, Gweru, Zimbabwe 1999, 35.

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, on Social Concern, n. 35.

¹⁷ Dominic Cardinal Ekandem was the first Nigerian prelate to be elected to the College of Cardinals. This was in

birth to the Missionary Society of St Paul, Nigeria (MSP), which with a national character, would ensure that no Nigerian was a stranger in any part of the country. It would eventually spread abroad into a rising body of young missionary priests summoning all nations to be reconciled to God.

The story of a missionary beginning

The establishment of the MSP allowed the diverse tribes of Nigeria to grow together in the common essentials of humanity and faith through the love of Christ in the Church. Obviously, the church was the only reliable institution that had such a capacity to initiate national unity during those flammable social moments. The bishops applied the grace of ecclesial unity to secure reconciliation and peace. The story of MSP's emergence is thus as interesting as it is graceful. Above all, it highlights how the universal Church could harness the gift of its unity in diversity to respond to difficult issues. As hinted above, the initiator of the "original idea" of a national seminary for Nigeria was Cardinal Dominic Ekanem. According to C. K. Nwosu, when in 1969, Pope Paul VI addressed the African bishops in Uganda "it scarcely crossed the minds of those present that it was from the troubled West African country (Nigeria) that there would emerge the first organized and coherent episcopal response to the papal challenge that Africans become *"missionaries to yourselves"*¹⁸. Yet more interesting was that the initiator, the then Bishop Dominic Ekanem himself was not present at the assembly in Kampala Uganda.

Nonetheless, after the ecclesiastical vicissitudes that normally accompany such initiatives and coupled with the beleaguered social conditions of Nigeria at the time, Dominic Ekanem continued to believe in consolidating the church's work of evangelization as one united family. Unity was a prerequisite for the church that must challenge and secure peace in Nigeria. Bishop Ekanem intended to replicate the idea

of the Irish Maynooth Seminary College where all the dioceses in Ireland had candidates for the priesthood. According to him, "If Nigerian priests were trained together some dioceses that lacked vocations to the priesthood could be helped by priests from another diocese within the country... Through a national seminary, the unity of our nation would be very much enhanced"¹⁹. In May 1976, when Dominic Ekanem became a cardinal, he was able to present a "modified version" of his proposal to Pope Paul VI. The modification was a shift from an ordinary national seminary to a "missionary" seminary. As C. K. Nwosu explained:

"The Cardinal informed the Pope that God had blessed Nigeria with many vocations and suggested the possibility of many Nigerian priests helping in the evangelization of other African countries. He inquired about the chances of Rome granting permission for a missionary seminary in Nigeria.... The proposed new seminary would be different. Its purpose would be to raise and nurture indigenous vocations for evangelization in Africa and beyond"²⁰.

Pope Paul VI had welcomed this idea, if it was also the unanimous agreement of the church in Nigeria. He also donated the ample sum of sixty thousand pounds sterling (60,000.000) to enable its take off²¹. Eventually, in September 1976, the conference of Nigerian bishops sitting in Kaduna voted in favor of the initiative. In 1978, the Nigerian bishops erected the Missionary Society of St. Paul into a "Pius Union", ratified later that year by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and welcomed by Pope John Paul II. In 1994, the Congregation also erected the MSP into a "Society of Apostolic Life of Diocesan Right"²². This meant that although other aspects of its life were essential, emphasis on its apostolic mission and charism became a prerogative. It was the enduring hope of Cardinal Ekanem who "put the considerable weight of his ecclesiastical prestige firmly be-

1976. He also doubles as the first indigenous bishop in West Africa.

¹⁸ C. K. O. NWOSU, *Cardinal Dominic Ekanem and the Growth of the Catholic Church in Nigeria*, Op. cit., 328. (Brackets mine).

¹⁹ D. EKANDEM, *In the Vineyard of the Lord: My Memoirs*, Abuja 1996, 41, quoted in C. K. O. NWOSU, Op. cit. 330.

²⁰ C. K. O. NWOSU, *Cardinal Dominic Ekanem and the Growth of the Catholic Church in Nigeria*, Op. cit., 331.

²¹ Ibid. 332.

²² Cf. Code of Canon Law, *CIC*. n. 579.

hind the initiative during its formative years, both at home and abroad”²³, to arrive at this point of a missionary status. The Cardinal was not just an apostle; he was a true patriot, and a great ambassador of the Nigerian church.

The young society was named after St. Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles in imitation of his charismatic and missionary spirit. It was also in a way, to show respect to Pope Paul VI who played a crucial role towards its establishment. Taking St. Paul as patron thus essentially reveals the young society’s basic missionary attitude and spirituality. We shall talk about this in subsequent paragraphs. Meanwhile, the MSP adopted this motto, **“So we are ambassadors of Christ** (Pro Christo Legatione Ergo Fungimur); *it is as though God were appealing through us and the appeal that we make in Christ’s name is: be reconciled to God*” (2Cor. 5:20). Indeed, the MSP takes up the tough mission of recalling the world back to Christ, telling humanity to be reconciled again to God: a goal of preaching in a world, which rapidly abhors the idea of God.

“The society, following the footsteps of the great apostle of the Gentiles St Paul, has as its primary aim the ministry of preaching, in imitation of Jesus Christ who went about preaching the Good News of the Kingdom. The special task of preaching the Gospel to the nations as ambassadors of Christ, calls on all the members to go out and serve other people. This involves answering the call of the Church, especially in needy dioceses throughout the world. The society undertakes the missionary activities to all nations in accordance with the mandate of Christ”²⁴.

A larger vision for the African missionaries

When the Nigerian Bishops decided to establish the MSP, they knew very well the desires of Paul VI in terms of the Church’s missionary mandate and updating. In 1975, this Pope wrote that to evangelize is the deepest identity for

which the Church exists²⁵. The bishops also knew about the many international missionary institutes already operative in Nigeria. Their conviction was that “even poor local churches like our own must be part of this missionary movement”. They wanted the Nigerian Church to unite with the world communion in witnessing to Christ to the nations. To be a Christian is to be missionary, and a church that is not missionary, is not the church of Christ²⁶. Vatican II went beyond the sending out of missionaries to stressing that every Christian by virtue of his or her baptism is a missionary. This is why Pope Francis has made the “missionary option” the priority of his pontificate urging every believer to step out and witness to Christ. If the pilgrim church is indeed missionary by nature²⁷, the local churches of Africa are for the same reason missionary. This is because, according to Vatican II, when the local church is rooted in the socio-cultural life of its peoples and is equipped with its own supply of indigenous vocations and ecclesial structures, it gains some stability and firmness in the faith²⁸. We must therefore acknowledge the church in Africa as People of God, which Avery Dulles describes as the “principal paradigm of the Church” in the documents of Vatican II²⁹. According to the Council:

“This Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament. For their locality, these are the new people called by God in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness.... In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic church”³⁰.

However, there are issues regarding the very “missionary identity” of the African person as an evangelizer. Different people conceptualize

²³ J. O. ONAIYEKAN, *Introduction to the Constitution of the Missionary Society of St Paul of Nigeria*, issued in Abuja, Easter Sunday, April 16 1995.

²⁴ *Constitutions and Directives of the Missionary Society of St Paul of Nigeria*, Ambassador Publications, Nigeria 2000, 1.

²⁵ Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 14.

²⁶ *Constitutions and Directives of the Missionary Society of St Paul of Nigeria*, Viii.

²⁷ Cf. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes* n. 2.

²⁸ Ibid. 19.

²⁹ Cf. A. DULLES, *Models of the Church*, Image Books, NY 2002, 45.

³⁰ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 26.

the term “mission” or “missionary” in different ways. Paul VI warned that a partial or fragmentary definition of the reality of evangelization risks impoverishing or distorting it unless all its essential elements are included³¹. Under current missiological developments, the idea of mission evolves rapidly and David J. Bosch asserts that Christian mission more than ever before is in the firing line today³². The question now is whether Africans are acknowledged as missionaries and evangelizers in the church’s understanding of the terms. The impression is that sometimes they are not. Of course, stereotypes and pre-judgements about Africa are never lacking in the church, but they can be very damaging. In the Church there should be neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal 3:26-29; Eph. 2: 11- 22). The Church cannot effectively carry out the missionary vocation in the modern world unless it realizes that “the future of the Christian faith lies with the emerging churches of the developing world”³³. This question of identity is a challenge, the cause of which we shall see later on this article.

Indeed, we have so far concentrated on the Missionary Society of St Paul, which is a Catholic body, but the reality is that there are other Christian denominations (mainline, Pentecostal, evangelical, independent churches etc.), originating from Africa that are scattered all over the world in active evangelization. Several Nigerian Pentecostal groups are growing powerfully in different parts of the world. Their emergence, even in hostile environments testifies to a power more than the effects of human mobility or migrations. This is what Allen L. Effa describes as the Nigerian factor in Global Christianity. According to him, “*Nigerian churches are helping to change the face of European and North American Christianity and are part of a growing global mission force*”. These missionaries actually help to “revitalize mainline parishes in Europe and North America”. Hence, “we see a mission in reverse taking place as the vitality and vision of African Christianity not only finds

foothold in Europe and North America but also challenges the very expression of Christianity in those continents”³⁴.

The concrete praxis of mission

The Missionary Society of St. Paul, Nigeria has given renewed hope to many dioceses around the world. Apart from Parish apostolates, they engage in diverse ecclesial activities including chaplaincies, educational and civic developmental projects. Their basic approach is that of collaborating with indigenous pastoral agents to engage in a mutually respectful dialogue with host communities. This is why as already mentioned; the establishment of the MSP proves to be a typical example of how ecclesial communion and solidarity could serve the evangelization of today’s world. But there are various ways to read the lines of African missionary activities.

The first is *Missio ad gentes* that makes the Church present among diverse peoples. Although the MSP sent out its first missionaries to Buea Diocese in Cameroon, Monrovia in Liberia and to the African-American apostolate in the United States, it was in September 1995, that the young society had its first General Chapter, “becoming an autonomous and adult member of the family of the missionary institutes of the universal church”³⁵. Today, almost 300 MSP missionaries are scattered abroad, while many young men aspire to join. It suffices to mention some of the countries where they serve, that include those in Africa, Europe and America. In Africa, they work in Botswana, Malawi, South Sudan, the Gambia, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad, South Africa, Cameroon etc. In Europe, the MSP priests serve in diverse apostolates in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Ireland among others. In the Americas, these African missionaries are already in various dioceses in the United States, Canada, the Bahamas and Grenada etc.

Secondly, the praxis of mission typical to African missionaries is the practical pastoral ap-

³¹ Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 17.

³² Cf. D. J. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Orbis Books Maryknoll, NY 1991, 1-11.

³³ J. FUELLENBACH, *Church: Community for the Kingdom*, Logos Publications, Manila 2004, 93.

³⁴ A. L. EFFA, “Releasing the Trigger: The Nigerian Factor in Global Christianity” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 37: 4(October 2013), 214 – 218.

³⁵ J. O. ONAIYEKAN, *Introduction to the Constitution of the Missionary Society of St Paul of Nigeria*, Op. cit.

proach. The MSP takes as a priority, *primary evangelization*: the founding and developing of new Christian communities in remote places, at the grassroots. It is indubitable that there are places in our world that have not yet encountered the light of the Gospel. Secondly, the Society engages in the *Apostolate of the Pen*. They run the *Ambassador Publications*, which enables them to communicate the Gospel in print to all. Yet, the pastoral need that tends to determine the proper role of the MSP is that of *Re-animating* the faith where it is moribund, and lacking ministers. Although this happens mainly outside Africa, it is gradually becoming the largest and most challenging work of the MSP and indeed all missionaries from Africa in the global field. What this implies is that while concentrating on primary evangelization in poor, neglected areas, the Missionary Society of St Paul, Nigeria finds itself welcoming invitations that square more and more into the course of the New Evangelization. This also gives them the rare opportunity of operating where many people exist: at the neglected peripheries of society or at the cold margins of faith. Pope Benedict XVI indeed, exhorted Africa to take active part in this new project of the Church's renewal especially in Europe.

"The pilgrim Church in Africa is also called to contribute to the new evangelization in secularized countries, which once provided numerous missionaries but are today sadly lacking in vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. In the meantime, great numbers of African men and women have accepted the invitation of the Lord of the harvest.... This form of cooperation, which should be governed by accords between the sending and the receiving Churches..., provides valuable support for the new

evangelization in countries of ancient Christian tradition"³⁶.

Another point is that African missionaries bring to the Church the richness of a contextual theological worldview furnished with inculturated ecclesial models. When Pope Paul VI told Africans in his 1969 speech, "you may, and you must, have an African Christianity", he also called Africa the *New homeland* of Christ. Hardly was he imagining a context where Europe would be rejecting its Christian heritage. The Pope was calling on Africa to enrich and renew the Christian religion with the wealth of its cultural uniqueness and refreshing humanism. Africans are a people of signs and symbols, a sacramental race whose cultures and customs are naturally liturgical. Their traditions point to God in ways westerners never knew it. It is such that every religious gesture is a language of the universe corresponding to transcendence. The sense of community, the symbolic body movements, joyful songs and general African liturgical customs are never meaningless externalities. This is what many critics fail to understand. These ways of worship embody the secrets of African vitality



Inculturated into Christianity. They are what the missionaries hope to cultivate among peoples: *the joy of life and the hope of faith*. Pope Benedict VI said that Africa is now a "spiritual lung for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope"³⁷. We can confirm this looking at how young African missionaries are re-igniting the faith around the globe and helping people to rediscover the essence of the Christian community.

Now, one area that the world needs Africa is in the area spirituality and the culture of life. Because, African cultural belief systems com-

³⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Africae Munus*, n. 167.

³⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Africae Munus*, n. 13.

mand their way of being, the religious heritage of Africa is no doubt a panacea for the lack of authentic spirituality in the world. We are talking about the hermeneutic of humanism and communal encounter. Africans remind the world that the Church is the small groups, the relational communities. When Africans facilitate ecclesial activities, there unfolds a meaningful difference predicated on a profound sense of the sacred. Such spiritual disposition makes for genuine encounter between the human person and God. Thus, African missionaries play crucial roles in the reconstruction of lives battered by the persistent postmodern loss of God, individualism and utilitarianism. African values reconnect the human family to its divine essence. Those who encounter the members of the Missionary Society of St Paul for example attest that they are not only eloquent preachers of the word of God, but excellent in human relations that re-create God's presence, a humanism that makes the Gospel a genuine incarnational encounter.

Challenges facing African missionaries

Talking about the challenges, which face African missionaries, could be tricky. First, one risks making statements that wrongly isolate them. Secondly, challenges vary according to territories and are never the same for everyone considering today's postmodern contexts. Regarding these contexts, the realities are stark and one cannot exhaust the many studies already done on the question. Defined by a sense of pluralism, skeptical of any absolutes and making all truth claims relative, postmodern cultures see everything as depending on individual choices³⁸. Again, postmodernity manifests mainly in what Robert Schreiter calls "the rubric of globalization" representing a concrete world order that mission must confront. "Globalization appears to be the best frame by which we can interpret and engage the world in response to our call to participate in the bringing about of the

Reign of God in our world"³⁹. In our *global village*, everything is interconnected and cultures intermingle. Yet, the idea portends a huge challenge for the African missionary, who is caught-up in the endless web of its consequences.

When we talk about globalization, it is a worldview full of culture shocks. For the developing world, the first thing that comes to mind is exploitation: culturally, economically, politically, etc. For Africa, it points quickly to impoverishing global policies that contribute significantly to the way Africans are judged overseas. Even as we do not intend to go into the contentious reasons of why Africa is poor or underdeveloped, it is sad how this links to religious vocations. It suggests that many young people in the developing nations take up the religious vocations in order to escape from poverty. On the surface, this sounds credible, but it is a serious vote of no confidence on the genuine sacrifice and commitment of young Africans serving in challenging territories of mission. Overseas, they take up some of those difficult roles that young Europeans would rather not take. Host communities should stop purposefully enacting policies aimed at reminding Africans that they are by the way, poor strangers. This prevents genuine integration. If a missionary constantly feels like a stranger, conditioned and restricted, he cannot contribute his best.

When European missionaries first came to Africa, they came with supplies of money and materials to establish churches. Indeed, they succeeded in planting churches but these churches were not well equipped to take responsibility for themselves. Though it is not our topic, European paternalism helped to render Africa dependent. Again, we must also remember that the African concept of community and family influences the missionary. Family ties back home are so strong that an African missionary cannot avoid thinking about the well-being of those at home. It is impossible to uproot an African from his or her family roots because it feels like death. A missionary not connected to his cultural roots cannot perform well. The situation is worse when

³⁸ Cf. J. C. SILVALON, "The Challenge of Postmodern Culture and Mission" in L. T. STANISLAUS – M. UEFFING (eds.), *Intercultural Mission* Vol 2, Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches, Institut, Sankt, Augustin 2015, 36-49.

³⁹ R. J. SCHRIETER, "Globalization and Reconciliation: Challenges to Mission" in, R. J. SCHREITER (ed.), *Mission in the Third Millennium*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2001, 122.

these missionaries are expected to remit moneys back to their headquarters in Africa. All these affect the practice of mission that instead of advancing the Kingdom of God, missionaries busy themselves with how much the pay is. The point is that it is necessary to separate African vocations from the stereotype of poverty.

Although the stigma of poverty challenges African Churches to know the kind of persons they call into ministry, we must however remember that money is important for missionary work. Religious congregations and dioceses should strive to be self-dependent and take the well-being of their members seriously. Proper missionary formation is also a major issue here. Many scholars have highlighted the reality of the modern world where globalized interculturality is the new paradigm of mission⁴⁰. It is understandable that a well-packaged missionary formation cognizant of global pluralistic realities should be the most essential element of an integrated religious orientation in today's context. Hence, the African church must take the issue of formation seriously. Quality counts in mission, not quantity. Many priests and religious do not receive a standard missionary formation before going on mission and the consequences are huge in places like Europe and America. Unfortunately, the poorly formed outnumber the professionally formed missionaries. One of the ways to improve on this is to set up mission-oriented institutes or utilize the opportunities provided by institutions like the National Missionary Seminary of St Paul, Nigeria, where MSP missionaries train before embarking on mission. This type of initiative is very important since it also envisages the formation of laypersons for mission. Proper missionary formation will help to transform both the missionary and the aims of mission and this will save Africa from some embarrassments.

Conclusion

Today's missionary reality "points more to the nature of faith and less to the significance of the human agencies of its transmission"⁴¹. To understand how African missionaries are changing the face of global mission, we must understand that the concept of power is changing. The poor are gradually becoming the powerful as the churches of the third world grow. The reality is not just about the shifting gravitational centre of Christianity to the South.

It is about God's project with the poor. Now we see significant paradigm shifts in missionary practice, in theology and in ecclesial self-understanding where the poor are the real evangelizers of the 21st century⁴². The truth is that African missionaries, though poor have much more to offer to Christian mission. Bringing young African missionaries into the western world simply to manage homes for the sick and the elderly makes mission a matter of work and pay which serves to maintain old ecclesiastical status quo. As a brainchild of the Nigerian Bishops conference, the Missionary Society of St Paul is a model of what African can offer. It is a challenge to other third world churches. Sadly, many recent Nigerian Bishops do not know their connection to this great missionary society integrating Nigerian cultural and Christian fecundity into a global equation. The lesson from the MSP is that Christian mission is more about who has genuinely encountered the person of Jesus Christ, motivated, and urged by the joy of the Gospel to evangelize⁴³. A new form of Christianity where African cultural values enmesh into the Church's global identity is thus, in the making.

We thank the author who sent this article to be published in the Sedos Bulletin.

*The photo at page 4 is taken from:
<https://www.mspfathers.org/missions>

⁴⁰ See, L. T. STANISLAUS – M. UEFFING (eds.), *Intercultural Mission* Vol. 2, (eds.) *Intercultural Mission* Vol 2, Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches, Institut, Sankt, Augustin 2015.

⁴¹ See K. BEDIAKO, *Jesus in Africa: Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Editions Clé and Regnum Africa and Paternoster Press, U.K 2000, 116.

⁴² See, X. PIKAZA – J. A. DA SILVA (eds.), *The Pact of the Catacombs: The Mission of the Poor in the Church*, Editorial Verbo Divino, Spain 2015.

⁴³ FRANCIS, *Evangelium Gaudium*, n. 264.

La vita tra *ontologia e aspirazione umana* nella religiosità africana

I sentieri interpretativi degli studiosi e le implicazioni missionarie

Verso la comprensione della religiosità africana: una introduzione

Uno dei dati più interessanti che emerge con evidenza nello studio dell'Africa, è il suo aver iniziato, da alcuni anni, a raccontarsi da sola. La sua storia, cultura, pensiero e religiosità, a lungo mediate dalle interpretazioni di esploratori, missionari, colonizzatori europei, e a lungo fraintese o ignorate da buona parte di essi nei loro scritti, scorrono ora anche nelle pagine dei tanti autori africani che con giusto orgoglio, da ogni parte del continente, ne rivendicano conoscenza ed esperienza. È dalla lettura di alcune di queste pagine, una lettura comunque aperta anche ad altri contributi, che si viene a conoscenza dell'esistenza di un concetto fondamentale, posto a tema nel presente articolo: la vita è il *fil rouge* che attraversa l'esistenza di tutti gli elementi della creazione divina e rappresenta la massima aspirazione umana.

Questa tematizzazione viene qui elaborata attraverso i percorsi interpretativi di tre autori che, all'interno della sconfinata produzione testuale sul pensiero e sulla religione tradizionale africana, hanno prestato una particolare attenzione alla questione della vita, chiave interpretativa di entrambi.

Essi sono il belga Placide Tempels, colui che ha avviato la riflessione in merito, e gli africani Vincent Mulago e Laurenti Magesa, coloro che tale riflessione hanno raccolto, precisato e sviluppato. È lecito affermare che il loro lavoro, centrato sull'area bantu nel caso di Tempels e Mulago, esteso all'intera area africana subsahariana nel caso di Magesa, costituisce lo sfondo essenziale della questione in oggetto¹.

Prima di entrare nel merito, si ritiene opportuno provare ad offrire un quadro sintetico della religione africana, costruito attraverso alcune delle questioni evidenziate con maggior frequenza nella letteratura contemporanea più ac-

reality and meaning» in *Lucerna*, 4 (1983), 9-24. In essi, la vita viene definita la «realtà ultima» della Religione Tradizionale Africana; A. M. NG'WESHEMI, «The Way of the Ancestor Revisited: The Concept of Life in African Traditional Religion», in *Africa Theological Journal*, 34, 2 (2014), 1-14; F. O. C. NJOKU, *Essays in African philosophy, thought & theology*, Clacom Communications, Enugu, Lagos 2002, 167-168; J. SHAMUANA MABENGA, *L'Africa che canta la vita. La cultura africana della vita alla luce dei suoi proverbi*, EdUP, Roma 2000, 50; M. NKAUFU NKEMNKIA, *Il pensiero africano come "vitalogia"*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1995, 96, 102, 141-142; P. A. KALILOMBE, «La spiritualità in una prospettiva africana», in R. GIBELLINI (ed.), *Percorsi di Teologia Africana*, Queriniana, Brescia 1994, 179-211; B. BUJO, *Africa e morale cristiana: un processo di inculturazione*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1994, 99-100. Qui l'autore afferma: «La chiave per poter capire la religione degli africani, infatti, sta nella preoccupazione che essi hanno per la vita»; H. SINDIMA, «Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective», in C. BIRCH - W. EAKIN - J. B. McDANIEL (ed. by), *Liberating Life. Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, Orbis Books, New York 1990, 137-147; Engelbert MVENG, in *Identità africana e cristianesimo*, SEI, Torino 1990, 47-48 (ed. originale in lingua francese: *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise. Paroles d'un croyant*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1985), scrive: «La realtà fondamentale, nella tradizione africana, è la vita. La vita allo stato puro si trova solo in Dio, autore e fonte di ogni vita. [...] Sull'immenso campo di battaglia del mondo dove la vita e la morte si affrontano costantemente, la missione dell'uomo è quella di individuare gli alleati della vita, di conquistarli alla sua causa e garantire così la propria sopravvivenza che è nello stesso tempo vittoria della vita. Questo è il significato profondo della religione tradizionale africana. Prendiamo un qualsiasi rito africano: esso è un rito di liberazione e di salvezza dell'uomo. Analizziamo le preghiere della religione tradizionale: cercano tutte la salvezza presso le potenze della vita».

¹ Sulla lettura della vita quale concetto centrale per la comprensione dell'universo africano, si segnalano gli ulteriori e più specifici contributi di F. A. OBORJI, «Religione tradizionale africana tra pluralismo e realtà ultima», in *Pluralismo e missione, sfide e opportunità* 58, 1 (2005), 93-124 e di E. E. UZUKWU, «Igbo world and ultimate

creditata². Esse riguardano la sua definizione, le caratteristiche generali, la centralità che occupa all'interno del tessuto culturale, la sua singolarità o pluralità, e, infine, i suoi elementi costitutivi.

Secondo J. Omosade Awolalu, "When we speak of African traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is a religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it"³. Questa religione, "Africa's own way of coming to terms with reality"⁴, che ha preceduto l'arrivo del Cristianesimo e dell'Islam, e che tuttora influenza il pensiero e la vita di milioni di africani, si caratterizza per il suo scorrere nei miti, favole, racconti, proverbi, precetti etici, preghiere, simboli, danze e rituali, e per il suo mancare, a differenza di altre religioni, di un fondatore, di scritture sacre e di zelo missionario⁵.

Essa rappresenta il cuore della cultura africana, l'elemento che l'attraversa e pervade ad una profondità e pienezza tali da rendere impossibile il loro distinguersi e possibile affermare che la cultura africana è una cultura religiosa, e che l'uomo africano è un uomo religioso. A tal proposito hanno fatto scuola le parole di John S. Mbiti, che nel 1969, all'interno del suo testo più

noto, *African Religions and Philosophy*, qui in traduzione, ebbe a scrivere: "Poiché le religioni tradizionali permeano tutti i settori della vita, non esiste distinzione formale tra sacro e profano, religiosità e mancanza di religiosità, sfera materiale e spirituale della vita. Ovunque si trovi un africano, là è la sua religione: la porta con sé nei campi dove semina o raccoglie i prodotti della terra; essa lo accompagna a una festa o a una cerimonia funebre; se studia è con lui durante gli esami a scuola o all'università; se è un politico, lo accompagna in Parlamento"⁶.

All'interno della stessa pubblicazione l'autore dichiara di fare uso, per riferirsi al fenomeno religioso africano, dell'espressione religioni tradizionali africane al plurale, in quanto a suo avviso ogni popolo africano possiede un sistema religioso che gli è proprio e che non può essere esteso ad un altro gruppo tribale⁷.

Con un diverso pensiero si è espresso E. Bola-ji Idowu, che in *African Traditional Religion. A Definition*, afferma invece la possibilità di parlare della religione tradizionale africana usando il singolare, e questo perché se si guarda all'Africa intera con uno sguardo attento ed approfondito, si riesce a coglierne un fattore comune, "a common Africaness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa"⁸, il cui elemento decisivo e determinante è il ricorrere dello stesso concetto di Dio⁹. La posizione di Idowu è stata seguita da molti altri

² Si precisa che, non essendo la religione tradizionale l'argomento principale dell'articolo, non è possibile dare conto e merito della totalità degli autori che tale letteratura concorrono a formare.

³ J. O. AWOLALU, «Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion», in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44, 2 (1976), 275.

⁴ K. A. OPOKU, «African traditional religion: An enduring heritage», in J. K. OLUPONA - S. S. NYANG (ed. by), *Religious Plurality in Africa. Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, New York 1993, 65.

⁵ J. S. MBITI, «Never break The Pot That Keeps You Together. Peace and Reconciliation in African Religion», in *Dialogue & Alliance* vol. 24, n.1 (2010), 4-21; E. IKENGA-METUH, *Comparative Studies of African traditional Religions*, IMICO Publishers, Onitsha, Nigeria 1987, 25-39; J. B. BALLONG-WEN-MEWUDA, «Religioni Africane Tradizionali», in *Dizionario di Missiologia*, 427-431; G. G. TATA, *Vivere-insieme. Aspetti etico-sociali dell'antropologia africana*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2014, 38.

⁶ J. S. MBITI, *Oltre la magia*, SEI, Torino 1992, 2 (ed. originale in lingua inglese: *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London 1969); cf. M. N. NKEM-NKIA, *Il Divino nella religione tradizionale africana. Un approccio comparativo ed ermeneutico*, Città Nuova, Roma 2011, 9; F. A. OBORJI, *La teologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, Leberit, Roma 2004, 45 (ed. originale in lingua inglese: *Trends in African Theology Since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation*, Leberit, Roma 1998).

⁷ J. S. MBITI, *Oltre la magia*, 1- 4; Tra gli autori che attualmente sostengono l'uso del plurale si segnala Jacob K. Olupona. In *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, 1, dichiara: «African religions are as diverse as the African continent itself. [...] It's not surprising, then, that this enormous range of peoples, cultures, and modes of living would also be reflected in a diverse range of religious expressions».

⁸ E. B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion. A Definition*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1973, 103.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 104. Idowu ipotizza che la presenza di questa comunanza di dati culturali e religiosi possa trovare una spiegazione nella comune origine razziale o nel fenomeno della diffusione.

autori che nella piena consapevolezza della pluralità e diversità delle religioni africane, hanno voluto anch'essi intraprendere un percorso di ricerca comparativo attraverso il quale rilevare e poi sistematizzare gli elementi in esse comuni¹⁰. Tra questi si è successivamente inserito lo stesso John S. Mbiti che nel febbraio del 1989, nella prefazione alla seconda edizione della sua opera sopracitata, asserì: «Nella prima edizione ho parlato di 'religioni africane' al plurale, per evidenziare la diversità della religiosità africana. Da allora ho sentito il bisogno di sottolineare anche gli elementi in comune e l'unità potenziale (non uniformità) all'interno di questa diversità. Di conseguenza, in lezioni e altre pubblicazioni ora mi servo del singolare, 'religione africana', più dell'espressione plurale»¹¹. Ed infatti, nel suo *Introduction to African Religion*¹², che qui si prende come modello di riferimento, egli specifica le cinque parti essenziali che costitui-

scono il nucleo e fondamento della religione africana. Esse sono le credenze in Dio, negli spiriti, nella vita umana, nella magia, nell'aldilà; le pratiche e cerimonie che includono il pregare, l'offrire sacrifici, il fare offerte e rituali; i luoghi e gli oggetti religiosi quali altari, grotte, colline sacre, fiumi, amuleti, e maschere; i valori e i principi morali quali la verità, la giustizia, l'amore, il bene e il male, il rispetto per la gente e la prosperità, la responsabilità individuale e comunitaria, l'integrità; i leaders religiosi come i sacerdoti, gli uomini della pioggia, gli anziani, i divinatori, gli uomini medicina e i re¹³.

La forza vitale di Placide Tempels

Nell'atmosfera culturale del primo dopoguerra, segnata, tra altro, dalla pesante critica al sistema coloniale, e dalla controversa teoria del "prelogismo" del filosofo francese Lucien Lévi-Bruhl, in base alla quale la mente dei cosiddetti popoli primitivi, ignorando i principi di identità e causalità, sarebbe prelogica e in questo diversa da quella dei popoli europei¹⁴, il missionario belga Placide Tempels¹⁵ consegna al mondo la

¹⁰ Tra i sostenitori dell'esistenza di un nucleo comune: D. E. THOMAS, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson, NC, 2005, 25-26; D. ZAHAN, nel suo *Religion spiritualité et pensée africaines*, Petit Bibliothèque Payot, Paris 1970, 9, così afferma: «La diversité des ethnies africaines ne doit pas faire obstacle à une telle entreprise; car, en fait, la différenciation à ce point de vue touche moins les idées que leur expression, à travers des éléments dissemblables, liés aux occupations, à la flore et à la faune»; G. PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion*, Hutchinson's University Library, London 1954, 11; P. AKOI, *Religion in African Social Heritage*, 1970, 196. Tra le sintesi offerte: A. F. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion. Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret, 2005, 13-28; J. ILUNGA MUYA, «Alcuni elementi costitutivi dell'esperienza religiosa africana» in R. CIPRIANI - G. MURA (cura di), *Il fenomeno religioso oggi. Tradizione, mutamento, negazione*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2002, 778-800; R. BAUM, «African Religions: An Interpretation», in K. A. APPIAH and H. L. GATES (ed.), *Africana. The encyclopedia of the African and African American experience*, Basic Civitas Book, New York 1999, 31-34; S. A. THORPE, *African Traditional Religions. An Introduction*, University of South Africa, Pretoria 1991, 104-117; E. I. METUH, *Comparative Studies of African traditional Religions*, 61-63; K. A. OPOKU, *West African Traditional Religion*, FEP International Private Limited, Accra 1978, 8. Nel presente articolo, nella stessa volontà di individuare ciò che unisce piuttosto di ciò che divide, si fa uso dell'espressione «religione tradizionale africana» al singolare.

¹¹ J. S. MBITI, *Oltre la magia*, XI.

¹² J. S. MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann, London 1975.

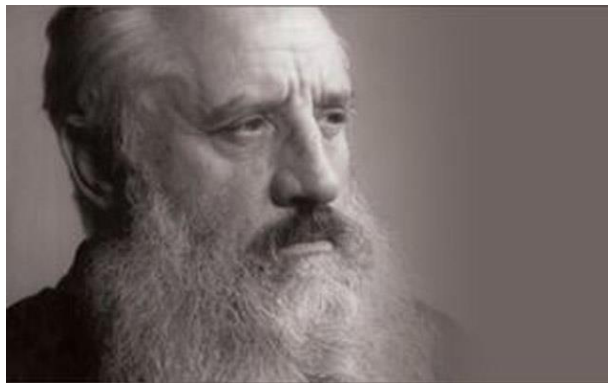
¹³ *Ibidem*, 10-11.

¹⁴ Questa teoria è presente in alcune sue pubblicazioni, tra le quali *Les fonctions mentales dans la sociétés inférieures*, Alcan, Paris 1910, 54-55, in cui scrive che: «Les objets, les êtres, les phénomènes peuvent être, d'une façon incompréhensible pour nous, à la fois eux-mêmes et autre chose qu'eux-mêmes. [...] En d'autres termes, pour cette mentalité, l'opposition entre l'un et le plusieurs, le même et l'autre, etc., n'impose pas la nécessité d'affirmer l'un des termes si l'on nie l'autre, ou réciproquement. Elle n'a qu'un intérêt secondaire». Trascorsi alcuni anni questa teoria è stata rifiutata dallo stesso Lévi-Bruhl. Come si legge nella sua opera postuma *Les carnets de Lucien*, Les Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1949, 72, «La structure logique de l'esprit est la même dans toutes les sociétés humaines connues, donc ne plus parler de caractère prélogique».

¹⁵ Frans Tempels nasce a Berlaar, in Belgio, il 18 febbraio 1906. Nel 1924 entra nel noviziato dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori Francescani di Thielt, ricevendo il nome di Placide. Nel 1933 inizia il suo impegno missionario in Congo Belga, ora Repubblica Democratica del Congo, che si concluderà nel 1962. Tra le sue pubblicazioni vi sono quattro scritti etnografici su diverse tribù bantu (Baluba, Bazela, Bashila) pubblicati in *Kongo-Overzee*, cinque articoli contro l'amministrazione coloniale belga pubblicati sul giornale *L'Essor du Congo* di Elisabethville, *Le concept fondamental de l'ontologie bantu*, *La Philosophie bantoue*, *Catéchèse bantoue*, *Notre rencontre*. Placide Tempels muore in Belgio il 9 ottobre 1977. Cf. H.

sua opera pionieristica e per molti versi esplosiva, *La Philosophie bantoue*¹⁶. L'aver qui affermato per primo, dopo quasi trent'anni di studio e lavoro in Congo belga¹⁷, l'esistenza di un pensiero africano logico e coerente, gli valse allora, e gli vale ancora oggi, tra i consensi e le critiche ricevute, un posto di prim'ordine nel campo dell'interpretazione filosofica e religiosa africana.

Entrando nel merito, Tempels sostiene che i popoli Bantu possiedono una propria ontologia che "penetra ed informa di sé tutta la mentalità dei primitivi, domina e orienta ogni loro comportamento"¹⁸. Si tratta di una lettura razionale della natura degli esseri visibili ed invisibili che costituisce il fondamento delle loro particolari concezioni di Dio, del mondo, dell'uomo, della vita e delle loro relazioni. Questo sistema ontologico, che costituisce la chiave di accesso per la comprensione dell'intero pensiero filosofico-religioso di questi popoli, ha al suo centro una nozione determinante, la "forza vitale"¹⁹. Tale forza, rappresenta "l'essere stesso in quanto tale, nella sua totalità attualmente realizzata e capace di una realizzazione più intensa"²⁰, è dunque l'essere di ogni essere, la sua natura intima, così da poter affer-



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mare che "l'essere è forza"²¹. Identificata con l'essere stesso, di cui non costituisce, come invece nel pensiero filosofico occidentale, un semplice attributo²², la forza vitale non si considera statica e completa, bensì dinamica e capace di accrescimento o indebolimento. Da ciò ne consegue che anche l'essere è dinamico e suscettibile di un cambiamento, di crescita o decrescita, più o meno intenso. Questo cambiamento trova la sua possibilità nelle interazioni ontologiche che si verificano con Dio e con tutti gli altri esseri o forze vitali da Lui creati, dotati di una energia specifica che può rinforzare l'uomo, e distinti a seconda del vigore della loro vita o del rango di appartenenza.

In questo universo di forze tra loro gerarchizzate ed interdipendenti, al punto che "si tiene come una tela di ragno di cui non si può far vibrare un solo filo senza far vacillare tutte le maglie"²³, Dio rappresenta il "Vigoroso", la forza vitale suprema che crea, mantiene in vita e rinforza vitalmente tutte le sue creature²⁴. È da Lui che la forza vitale comunicata inizialmente agli antenati dei clan, e da questi ai defunti, arriva, secondo precise leggi di primogenitura e vigore

RZEPKOWSKI, «Placide Tempels» in *Lessico di Missiologia*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2000, 604.

¹⁶ *La Philosophie bantoue* è il testo più conosciuto e controverso di Placide Tempels. Fu pubblicato per la prima volta in francese con la traduzione dal fiammingo ad opera di A. Rubbens, dalle Edizioni Lovania di Elisabethville nel 1945. Numerose sono state le edizioni successive e le sue traduzioni in varie lingue. In questo articolo si utilizza l'edizione in lingua italiana, *Filosofia bantu*, Ed. Medusa, Milano 2005.

¹⁷ Il nome attuale di questo Stato è Repubblica Democratica del Congo.

¹⁸ P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 37.

¹⁹ P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 57; cf. P. TEMPELS, «Le concept fondamental de l'ontologie bantu», in A. J. SMET, *Melanges de philosophie africaine*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, Kinshasa 1978, 153-180.

²⁰ P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 60.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 59; cf. P. TEMPELS, «Le concept fondamental de l'ontologie bantu», 159. Qui asserisce che: «Je penserais presque que, pour les Bantu, la notion de *force de la vie* remplace et répond à notre notion de l'*ens*. Chaque être est une force de la vie, chaque force de la vie est un être, et dans ce sens-là, la notion de force de la vie serait la notion fondamentale de l'ontologie bantu, la notion universelle suprême, applicable à tout ce qui existe réellement: Dieu, les esprits; les défunts, les hommes, les animaux, les plantes et les êtres matériels».

²² Nella coincidenza tra essere e forza vitale, e nella considerazione dell'essere come dinamico, Tempels ravvisa la differenza che separa la filosofia bantu da quella occidentale. In quest'ultima, infatti, l'essere è «ciò che è», e la forza ne costituisce solo un attributo, un accessorio. L'essere si caratterizza poi per la sua staticità e i cambiamenti che intervengono sono propri dei suoi attributi o accidenti. Cf. P. TEMPELS, «Le concept fondamental de l'ontologie bantu», 159.

²³ P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 55.

di vita²⁵ agli esseri umani e poi alle altre forze animali, vegetali e minerali. L'essere che occupa una posizione superiore è vitalmente più forte, e può aumentare o diminuire la forza vitale, o l'essere, di chi, o cosa, occupa una posizione inferiore. Esemplicando, gli antenati e i defunti possono esercitare la loro influenza vitale su tutti gli uomini, gli uomini sugli altri uomini di rango inferiore, sugli animali, sui vegetali e sui minerali. Il centro della creazione è rappresentato dall'uomo, la forza vitale visibile più potente che beneficia sia delle influenze vitali provenienti verticalmente da Dio, dagli antenati del clan e dai suoi defunti diretti, sia dalle influenze vitali derivanti, orizzontalmente, dalle forze vitali umane superiori e dalle forze vitali animali, vegetali e minerali, create appositamente da Dio per il suo rinforzo vitale.

In questa filosofia delle forze, che i Bantu considerano la saggezza data loro dagli antenati, e che caratterizza, spiega e condiziona le loro credenze, pratiche religiose, comportamenti e vita etica, *la suprema aspirazione dell'uomo è rappresentata dalla vita, dal vigore della vita che proviene da Dio*²⁶.

“Il valore supremo è la Vita, il vigore, il vivere vigorosamente, il vigore della vita. Di tutti i loro usi di cui non capiamo il senso, i Bantu direbbero che servono ad acquisire il vigore della vita o la forza vitale”²⁷.

La vita²⁸ è dunque al cuore dell'approccio filosofico e religioso dei Bantu, e rappresenta “ciò che motiva le preghiere e invocazioni rivolte a Dio, agli spiriti, ai defunti”²⁹. L'uomo bantu

sa perfettamente di essere inserito in un ordine ontologico di creazione e sussistenza predisposto da Dio, e che, non essendo in sé una forza vitale piena, solo la sua corretta e rispettosa relazione con la Fonte della vita e Vita Egli stesso, oltre che con tutte le altre forze vitali operanti nella creazione, costituisce il mezzo tramite il quale assicurarsi il rinforzo vitale anelato.

L'Unione Vitale di Vincent Mulago

La lettura offerta da Placide Tempels mostra un universo di esseri o forze vitali alla ricerca costante di una vita più piena. Questa realtà è stata intercettata e ulteriormente tematizzata, pur se con qualche differenza, anche dallo stimato teologo africano Vincent Mulago³⁰ nel contesto della sua interpretazione del mondo bantu e, in particolare, della sua religione.

Tale interpretazione ha costituito l'oggetto del suo *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, e di una parte della sua tesi dottorale in teologia dal titolo *L'union vitale chez les Bashi, Banyarwanda et Barundi face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*³¹. Nei testi, attraverso un percorso di studio del vissuto fenomenologico di tre gruppi etnici della famiglia bantu, i Bashi, i Banyarwanda e i Barundi, egli individua e mette a tema un concetto ad esso centrale e soggiacente, l'*unione vitale*. “When one studies the

²⁵ All'interno di un clan il primogenito è considerato «l'anello di rinforzo, la vita che collega gli antenati alla sua discendenza», *ibidem*, 67.

²⁶ *Ibidem* 54, 57, 50; cf. anche *Catéchèse bantoue*, Le Bulletin des Missions, Les Bruges 1948, 5. Anche in questo testo, pensato per la catechesi dei Bantu, l'autore sostiene che «c'est la “vie”, la “force vitale” ou “la vie intense” qu'ils désirent par-dessus tout»; cf. P. TEMPELS, *Notre Rencontre*, Centre d'Etudes Pastorales, Limete-Léopoldville 1962, 12.

²⁷ P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 54.

²⁸ Come Tempels spiega in *Notre rencontre*, Centre d'Etudes Pastorales, Limete-Leopoldville 1962, 15, la vita non consiste solo nella vita fisica, ma anche nella vita interiore. Il rinforzo vitale cui l'uomo africano anela riguarda sia il corpo che «la richesse profonde des nos pensées, la générosité des nos élans, l'épanouissement de notre cœur».

²⁹ P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 54.

³⁰ Vincent Mulago nasce a Birava nella Repubblica Democratica del Congo nel 1924. Viene ordinato sacerdote a Roma nel 1952, e nel 1955 diviene dottore in teologia presso la Pontificia Università Urbaniana, con la dissertazione *L'union vitale bantu chez les Bashi, Banyarwanda et les Barundi face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*. Dopo esser stato il fondatore e direttore del Centre de pastorale Liturgique de l'Archidiocèse de Bukavu, diviene professore dapprima associato e poi ordinario all'Université Lovanium di Kinshasa. Nel 1966 fonda il *Centre de Religions Africaines* di Kinshasa e l'anno seguente la rivista *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*. Dopo essersi ritirato a Bukavu, diviene direttore del Centre Diocésain de Pastorale, Catéchèse et Liturgie, e rettore dell'Université Catholique de Bukavu. Vincent Mulago muore nel 2012. Cf. B. BUJO, «Vincent Mulago. Un passionné de la Théologie Africaine», in B. BUJO - J.I. MUJA (ed.), *Théologie africaine au XXI siècle. Quelques figures*, vol. I, Editions Universitaires, Fribourg 2002, 11-34.

³¹ Questa tesi, rimasta inedita, è stata oggetto di pubblicazioni parziali. In questo articolo si fa riferimento ad una di esse, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L'union vitale bantu face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*, Présence Africaine, Paris 1962.

family life, the political-social and the religious life of the bantu of Bushi, Rwanda and Burundi, one discovers at the centre of this life, the idea of vital union”³².

All'interno delle sue pubblicazioni Mulago sostiene il primato dell'esperienza religiosa nella cultura africana, il suo costituire l'orizzonte entro il quale leggere l'intera visione dell'uomo africano circa il mondo, la vita, i valori e le norme etiche³³.

Secondo la sua prospettiva, la religione tradizionale africana è un sistema costruito intorno a quattro credenze e quattro principi.

Le prime sono “la croyance à deux mondes, visible et invisible; la croyance au caractère communautaire et hiérarchique de ces deux mondes; l'interaction entre le deux mondes, la transcendance du monde invisible n'entravant pas son immanence; la croyance en un Etre Suprême, Créateur et Père de tout ce qui existe”³⁴. I secondi sono “l'unité de vie et la participation; la croyance à l'accroissement, à la décroissance et à l'interaction des êtres; le symbole, moyen principal de contact et d'union; une éthique découlant de l'ontologie”³⁵.

In questo sistema, in cui tutti gli esseri creati di entrambi i mondi sono considerati in grado di crescere e decrescere ontologicamente in base alle relazioni vitali intrattenute con altri esseri, gli antenati del mondo invisibile godono di un'importanza peculiare a motivo del ruolo chiave che assumono. Essi sono infatti i membri

invisibili della famiglia che, considerati viventi anche se defunti, per primi partecipano alla vita donata da Dio e per primi provvedono a farla scorrere nei loro discendenti viventi del mondo visibile, realizzando così *gli aumenti ontologici vitali* tanto anelati. Ciò spiega perché, in una cultura in cui la vita rappresenta il bene primario, la quasi totalità del culto dei viventi ruoti intorno a loro, e perché Mulago, nel definire la loro religiosità affermi che “La vie religieuse des Bantus semble pouvoir se résumer dans le culte rendu à leur ancêtres et leur monothéisme”³⁶.

Con maggiore precisione, si deve dire che il loro ancestralismo³⁷ va preso all'interno di un convinto monoteismo. Sebbene gli antenati rivestano un'importanza decisiva ai fini della trasmissione della vita, l'Essere Su-

premo non è affatto secondario o marginale, ma, come ri-

sulta dalla riflessione filosofica e teologica, Egli è il “Créateur”³⁸ che li crea e supera, la “Source intarissable de la vie, des forces et des moyens vitaux”³⁹ da essi dispensati agli altri esseri creati, “Celui qui est la source et la cause de tout bonheur”⁴⁰.

L'esperienza religiosa risulta dunque essere un fenomeno centrato sulla vita, che donata dall'Essere Supremo per il tramite degli antenati, circola tra tutti gli esseri dei due mondi attraverso una serie di relazioni ontologicamente rilevanti. Al centro di questo fenomeno Mulago afferma l'esistenza di un concetto chiave, *l'unione vitale*.

“Par unité de vie ou union vitale, nous entendons: a) une relation d'être et de vie de chacun avec son descendants, sa famille, ses frères de clan, son ascendance et avec Dieu, source ultime de toute vie; b) une relation ontique ana-



Vincent Mulago

³² V. MULAGO, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L'union vitale bantu face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*, 234; *ibidem*, 115.

³³ [...] Et comme la religion imprègne toute la vie du Muntu, comme celle de l'homme africain en général, on comprend aisément qu'elle soit l'élément central de la culture bantu et la clef de la compréhension de la vision du monde négro-africain», in Gwa Cikala M. MULAGO, *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, Kinshasa 1980², 1973¹, 9.

³⁴ Gwa Cikala M. MULAGO, *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 133.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 9.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 15; V. MULAGO, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L'union vitale bantu face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*, 87.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 107

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 112.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 108.

logue de chacun avec son patrimoine, son fonds, avec tout ce qu'il contient ou produit, avec ce qui y croît et vit"⁴¹.

L'unione vitale rappresenta la relazione ontologica ed esistenziale che unisce, in senso verticale ed orizzontale, tutti i membri viventi e defunti di una famiglia o di un clan con Dio e con i beni di loro appartenenza che rendono possibile la vita. Essa può altresì essere definita come la condizione ontologico-esistenziale in cui tutti gli esseri si trovano a vivere, in virtù del loro partecipare ad una stessa vita, donata da Dio e trasmessa per Suo conto dagli antenati. Grazie ad essa la vita circola, viene partecipata da tutti e può accrescersi.

Questa vita, "qui fait l'object de toutes les préoccupations de nos peuples"⁴², è una vita comunitaria che circola in tutti i membri di una famiglia o di un clan, rendendoli in tal modo uniti, solidali e interdipendenti. Considerato che essa è altresì dinamica e capace di crescere e decrescere a seconda delle influenze vitali di ciascuno, tutti gli sforzi dei membri della comunità sono volti alla sua circolazione e accrescimento, ben consapevoli che "Sortir de ce circuit, se dérober à l'influence vitale des membres vitalement supérieurs, serait vouloir cesser de vivre"⁴³.

La morale della vita di Laurenti Magesa

Sulla stessa linea interpretativa di Placide Tempels e Vincent Mulago va letto il contributo del tanzaniano Laurenti Magesa⁴⁴, il teologo che

ha messo al centro della sua riflessione il nesso tra vita, moralità e spiritualità, elaborando in tal modo una comprensione ulteriore della religiosità africana nella sua ricaduta etico - esistenziale.

Nella sua opera principale in relazione al nostro tema, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, l'autore asserisce che la moralità africana risulta comprensibile solo alla luce della visione religiosa nella quale affonda le sue radici e di cui costituisce espressione concreta.

Questa visione tradizionale presenta alcuni punti chiave che riguardano Dio, l'universo, gli esseri creati e gli antenati. In merito a Dio, la sua esistenza non è mai messa in discussione: egli è "The Primary and ultimate life-giving Power"⁴⁵, "the first Initiator of a people's way of life, its traditions"⁴⁶, e il Creatore dell'universo. Quanto all'universo, esso risulta diviso in due sfere poste in ordine gerarchico, intercomunicanti e abitate da esseri diversi⁴⁷. A tutti questi esseri Dio ha donato una *forza vitale* specifica che li mette in relazione, li rende capaci di influenzarsi reciprocamente, ed è direttamente proporzionale al ruolo da ciascuno rivestito. Tra questi, gli antenati occupano un posto di assoluto rilievo. In virtù del loro essere i progenitori del genere umano, e i principali intermediari della vita tra Dio e gli uomini, sono, infatti, le forze vitali più potenti della creazione e i custodi dell'intera tradizione morale divina⁴⁸. Al centro della creazione si trova l'uomo, *ontologicamente connesso* con tutte le altre forze vitali che lo influenzano, e che egli stesso può influenzare, sia nel bene che nel male.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 117; cf anche V. MULAGO, «Vital Participation. The Cohesive Principle of the Bantu Community», in K. A. DICKSON & P. ELLINGWORTH, *Biblical revelation and African beliefs*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1969, 137-158.

⁴² V. MULAGO, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L'union vitale bantu face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*, 118.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 135.

⁴⁴ Laurenti Magesa è un sacerdote tanzaniano della Diocesi di Musoma in Tanzania. Dopo aver conseguito il dottorato in teologia morale alla St. Paul University di Ottawa, ha insegnato presso la Catholic University of East Africa a Nairobi ed è stato professore invitato alla Maryknoll School of Theology di Maryknoll. È autore di diverse pubblicazioni di teologia morale, teologia africana e etica sociale. Tra le sue pubblicazioni più conosciute *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (1997), *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (2004), *Rethinking mission: evangeliza-*

tion in Africa in a new era (2006), *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality* (2013).

⁴⁵ L. MAGESA, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1997, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 35.

⁴⁷ Dio, gli spiriti e gli antenati occupano la sfera invisibile superiore, gli uomini, gli animali e i vegetali occupano quella visibile inferiore.

⁴⁸ L. MAGESA, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 35.

Considerato che *lo scopo dell'esistenza umana è la pienezza della vita*, “is to seek life, to see it that human life continues and grows to its full capacity”⁴⁹, e che tale pienezza è direttamente dipendente dalle altre forze vitali, le interazioni con esse sono assolutamente fondamentali e devono avvenire rispettando l'ordine morale istituito da Dio e custodito dagli antenati nella tradizione trasmessa attraverso le generazioni. Se l'ordine viene seguito, e così promossa la vita degli esseri, esso ha la forza di sostenere l'esistenza e la permanenza dell'universo, assicurando all'umanità una vita abbondante⁵⁰. Da ciò ne segue che il criterio etico di moralità che deve guidare la condotta umana è la promozione della vita, così come prevista da Dio. Tutto ciò che aiuta la vita è considerato buono e giusto, tutto ciò che la diminuisce è cattivo e ingiusto.

Secondo Magesa, nella riflessione etica africana, il mondo assume un'importanza fondamentale in quanto manifestazione di Dio, misticamente connesso con gli spiriti⁵¹ che lo abitano, e, soprattutto, in quanto indispensabile alla vita umana.

“In African ethical thought, the universe has been lent by God to Humanity on the condition that it must be kept in good order and used by all for the promotion of life, good relationships, and peace”⁵². Da ciò ne consegue che l'uomo e la sua comunità hanno gli obblighi morali di porsi in armonia con la creazione e di trattarla con attenzione e riconoscenza, apprezzando le sue risorse naturali necessarie per la vita, consentendo a tutti di accedervi e beneficiarne, ed evitando di manometterla o distruggerla insensatamente. La sua distruzione, infatti, comportando l'eliminazione di forze vitali, animate o

inanimate, indispensabili per l'uomo, comprometterebbe l'intenzionalità tipica della religiosità circa l'aspirazione ad una vita piena.

Al pari delle relazioni con il mondo, anche le relazioni interpersonali e con gli antenati sono sottoposte al vaglio etico. “The realization of sociability or relationships in daily living by the individual and the community is the central moral and ethical imperative of African Religion”⁵³. Questo imperativo etico si motiva nella considerazione delle relazioni quali la condizione essenziale per la circolazione della vita all'interno della comunità. La persona che difetta nella condivisione vitale con i membri della sua comunità, compie un atto immorale, in quanto allenta e indebolisce i legami vitali tra i membri che la compongono.

All'interno di una comunità il cui principio etico guida è la vita e

la sua conservazione, ogni evento in cui si verifica una interruzione o diminuzione della forza vitale, come nel caso di comportamenti immorali, malattie, calamità naturali, il ripristino della vita è di primaria importanza etica. Esso è affidato alla competenza degli esperti religiosi, “the moral conscience of African society”⁵⁴, che individuano la causa del problema, e attraverso i mezzi a loro disposizione, quali le preghiere, i sacrifici, le offerte e i medicinali, riattivano la circolazione vitale.

In sintesi, “the foundation and purpose of the ethical perspective of African Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this”⁵⁵.

Sempre interessato alla questione della vita, all'interno della sua opera più recente, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*⁵⁶, il teologo affronta il tema della spiritualità africana, considerandola determinante ai fini della comprensione dell'africano e del suo desiderio di vita piena. Egli afferma che questa spiritualità, che non appartiene solo ad un passato lontano, ma anche



Laurenti Magesa

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 52.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 56. Presenti nei fiumi, negli alberi, nelle rocce e negli animali, gli spiriti possono arrecare danno alla vita umana. Da ciò ne consegue l'obbligo di propiziarli con offerte e sacrifici.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 62.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 64.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 194.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 77.

⁵⁶ L. MAGESA, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2013.

ad un presente che ne riscontra la vitalità e la dinamicità, può costituire oggi nella sua originalità, un modello di vita alternativo a quello segnato dal materialismo, dal tecnicismo e dallo sfruttamento sregolato della terra.

L'autore chiarisce che nel contesto africano, diversamente da altri contesti religiosi, la spiritualità è lontana dal consistere ed esaurirsi in un'esperienza mistica riservata a pochi, o in una relazione personale e culturale con il divino che esclude gli altri ed il mondo in cui si vive. Al contrario, "In the African worldview, spirituality is more than a passive quality. Rather than a "state of being", it is a way of behaving or, rather, relating. It involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers. Better yet, it entails the mutual exchanges of energies among all beings"⁵⁷.

Precisando che "power" e "energy" sono sinonimi di "forza vitale"⁵⁸, la spiritualità consiste dunque nel disporsi in una relazione di scambio positivo di forza vitale con tutti gli esseri dell'universo. Questa forza, invisibilmente presente in tutti gli esseri, così legandoli gli uni agli altri, e rendendoli meritevoli di rispetto⁵⁹, è l'elemento indispensabile per la crescita della vita umana e l'armonia dell'universo. Il raggiungimento di questa armonia è demandato all'uomo e alla sua capacità di porsi in una corretta relazione con tutti gli altri componenti del creato.

In conclusione: "As an ongoing encounter with life, African spirituality is not a matter of mere belief or assent to doctrine and dogmas [...] It does not primarily answer the question of what we should believe; it responds, rather, to the question of *how we should live*"⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 26.

⁵⁹ Nell'elenco dei diversi elementi naturali che costituiscono l'ambiente di vita e le risorse del sostentamento umano, è interessante il cenno alla terra ancestrale. Essa è una terra diversa dalle altre, onorata e rispettata in modo speciale per il riconoscimento in essa della forza vitale degli antenati lì sepolti; la terra ancestrale è considerata *home*, a differenza degli altri luoghi che sono *houses*. È in essa che tutti desiderano essere sepolti.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 32.

Una religione centrata sulla vita: alcune implicazioni missionarie

Gli studiosi qui presi in considerazione hanno dimostrato efficacemente che il concetto centrale della religione tradizionale africana è la *vita*, nella sua duplice dimensione di condizione ontologica e di suprema aspirazione umana.

Il loro lavoro, confluito poi nell'elaborazione di una catechesi bantu basata sulla forza vitale nel caso di Placide Tempels⁶¹, e di un parallelo tra l'unione vitale bantu e l'unità vitale ecclesiale nel caso di Vincent Mulago⁶², consegna a noi cristiani sia la possibilità di costruire un dialogo con la religione africana fondato sull'idea della vita, che il doppio impegno dell'essere voce critica nei confronti di ciò che questa vita compromette ed alleato di ciò che la favorisce.

Partendo dalla convinzione che questo dialogo debba erigere ponti e non barriere, e che esso debba essere condotto in quel clima di rispetto e stima che permette una vera conoscenza ed un reciproco arricchimento, vanno riconosciuti i valori africani della considerazione di Dio come la Fonte della Vita, dell'esistenza come una comunione vitale intensa e solidale con Dio, gli uomini e l'ambiente che circonda e sostiene la vita, e degli antenati come i morti da non dimenticare che vivono invisibili vicino a Dio e agli uomini, e rinforzano, con la loro potenza vitale, la vita che circola nei loro discendenti. Nello stesso tempo, va apprezzato e sostenuto l'annuncio cristiano dell'abbondanza di vita nel dono di grazia di Gesù Cristo, in quanto esso può validamente corrispondere e portare a sazie-

⁶¹ La catechesi proposta da Placide Tempels per i popoli bantu, è contenuta nel suo *Catéchèse bantoue*, Les Bulletin des Missions, Abbaye de Saint-André-lez-Bruges, 1948.

⁶² Nel suo *Un visage africain du christianisme*, 161, Mulago sostiene che «La relation de vie qui fonde l'unité des communautés et des individus chez les Bantu, cette communication-participation vitale, et de moyens vitaux, cet effort d'accroissement, de dépassement, d'enrichissement ontal, trouve une réponse et une réalisation sublimes et transcendantes dans l'Eglise du Christ, communauté de vie elle aussi, dont le principe vital est une participation à la Vie trinitaire, humanisée dans le Verbe de Dieu fait Homme».

tà il profondo anelito africano verso la pienezza vitale⁶³.

“Il dialogo che oggi si instaura non è quello di due entità teoriche o di due ideologie, da una parte il Cristianesimo e dall'altra le tradizioni africane, no!, il dialogo che oggi si instaura è quello dei popoli africani con se stessi, di fronte al loro destino. Si tratta di vincere la morte storica ogni giorno più minacciosa. L'Africa fa appello a tutte le sue energie vitali. Il suo patrimonio religioso deve alimentare queste energie. Il Cristianesimo deve, quindi, costituire questo patrimonio religioso. Il Cristo è venuto perché noi avessimo la vita e la vita in abbondanza (Gv 10,10)”⁶⁴.

Come poc'anzi accennato, il dialogo qui solo tratteggiato non può essere l'unico obiettivo dello sforzo missionario. Esso deve infatti allargarsi e procedere di pari passo con gli impegni di contrasto delle situazioni che attentano alla vita, e di sviluppo di quelle che la promuovono. In questa direzione è di ispirazione l'Esortazione apostolica postsinodale *Africae munus* sulla Chiesa in Africa al servizio della riconciliazione, della giustizia e della pace. In essa, dopo una breve sintesi sulla visione africana della vita, e la constatazione che “Sulla vita umana in Africa pesano minacce molto forti”⁶⁵, si invita la comunità cristiana ad assumere posizioni costruttive sulle fondamentali questioni delle malattie, della povertà cronica, e dello sfruttamento sregolato delle risorse naturali⁶⁶.

We thank the author who sent this article to be published in the Sedos Bulletin.

⁶³ Tra coloro che individuano in Gesù Cristo la risposta all'istanza vitale africana, P. TEMPELS, *Notre rencontre*, 19-21; F. A. OBORJI, *La teologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, 158-160; L. MAGESA, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 173; B. BUJO, *Africa e morale cristiana: un processo di inculturazione*, 110.

⁶⁴ E. MVENG, *Identità africana e cristianesimo*, 82-83.

⁶⁵ BENEDETTO XVI, *Africae munus*, Esortazione postsinodale, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2011, n.72.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, n. 72, 73, 79, 80.

La mission de la femme dans le processus de la réconciliation à la lumière de *l'Africae Munus* cas du peuple *Béti* (Cameroun)

Introduction

Tout au long du siècle dernier, le thème de la réconciliation a été directement ou indirectement mentionné dans les discussions entre théologiens à propos de la mission. Pourtant, ce n'est que depuis quelques années qu'on a commencé à parler de la réconciliation comme une manière importante de faire la mission. Cette dernière repose sur la commune responsabilité des chrétiens et des chrétiennes appelés selon la diversité des ministères à témoigner la Bonne Nouvelle du Salut (cfr. Lc 24, 8-10). Baptisés, femmes et hommes, sont appelés à annoncer « la Bonne nouvelle à toutes les nations et de faire des disciples » (cfr. Mc 28,10). C'est dire qu'il n'y a pas une mission ecclésiale pour les hommes et une autre pour les femmes, ainsi la mission de l'Eglise est une et est la même pour tous. Le Synode de 2009 a choisi de se consacrer à la cinquième question de la première assemblée du synode de 1994¹, sur la réconciliation, la justice et la paix, probablement parce que l'Eglise voit dans cette question l'exigence plus importante de l'actuelle situation africaine. Cette centralité des situations sociales a porté à un certain déplacement de l'ecclésiologie de l'Eglise-famille de Dieu et a indiqué la centralité de la Christologie, de la réconciliation et de l'anthropologie du chrétien, témoin de l'Evangile. C'est dans cette perspective qu'on pourrait comprendre vraiment le titre du Synode: *L'Eglise en Afrique au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix*. « Vous êtes le sel de la terre ... Vous êtes la lumière du

monde » (Mt 5, 13.14). En outre, le Synode a aussi focalisé en particulier son attention sur la condition des femmes qui doivent parfois porter le poids des traditions tribales injustes telles que la polygamie et autres formes d'oppression sexuelle², afin que ces dernières puissent aussi prendre conscience de la tâche qui leur est confiée en tant que « colonnes vertébrales »³ des Eglises locales en Afrique. Partant de l'identification de la mission de la femme à la lumière de *l'Africae Munus*, nous chercherons à voir quel a été le rôle et la place accordée aux femmes dans le processus de la réconciliation; ensuite nous nous intéresserons au rôle des femmes dans le processus et la pratique de la réconciliation dans le contexte du peuple *béti* (Cameroun) qui est doté d'un sens aigu de la fraternité et de la solidarité, et en guise de conclusion nous proposerons quelques perspectives pour une mission au féminin.

1. La mission de la femme à la lumière de *l'Africae Munus*

Parmi les nombreuses questions abordées au synode de 2009, celle de la condition de la

¹ Cf. M. CHEZA - H. DERRIOTTE - R. LUNEAU, *Les évêques d'Afrique parlent (1969-1991). Documents pour le Synode africain*, Centurion, Paris, 443, 1992.

² Le Synode rappelle le « protocole de Maputo », un accord sur les droits des femmes adopté par l'O.U.A. le 11 juillet 2003 à Maputo, en Mozambique, dans la promotion de la « Charte africaine des Droits de l'homme et des peuples ». Il est composé de 32 articles qui exigent la ratification législative des lois sur les droits des femmes à la vie, à la dignité, à l'intégrité psychique, à l'héritage, à l'instruction mais aussi à la santé reproductive, c'est-à-dire à l'avortement.

³ Cf. BENOIT XVI, Exhortation Apostolique post-synodale sur l'Eglise en Afrique au service de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix *Africae Munus* (19 novembre 2011), 58 in AAS 104 (2012), 239-314. Sera abrégé dans les prochaines notes par le sigle: A.M.

femme en Afrique a occupé une place importante⁴, car il en ressort que les femmes ne sont pas encore pleinement intégrées dans les structures de responsabilités de l'Eglise, et dans la conception de son programme pastoral⁵. Se référant à la première assemblée spéciale des évêques pour l'Afrique, la question de la femme est revenue pour un meilleur approfondissement. Accorder aux femmes la même valeur et la même dignité qu'aux hommes pendant le synode était donc une interpellation de la société et de l'Eglise dans sa mission évangélisatrice. L'Eglise, suite à des situations de crise en Afrique, a ressenti l'urgence d'un engagement total pour la réconciliation, la justice et la paix sur toute l'étendue du continent. Les priorités ont été soulignées au niveau socioculturel: dans certains pays, on assiste encore aujourd'hui à une discrimination sexuelle qui frappe les femmes. Elles se voient encore privées de certains droits qui, pourtant, sont dévolus à toute personne humaine. Dans d'autres sociétés, on en arrive à traiter les femmes comme des esclaves, portant ainsi atteinte non seulement à leur dignité, mais aussi au meilleur patrimoine de la tradition africaine qui voit dans la femme, le symbole par excellence de la vie, don précieux. La finalité des réflexions du synode était donc de dénombrer quelques priorités, en occurrence celle de la question de la femme qui se dégageaient de l'étude et de l'action dans le domaine de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix. Cependant, quelle a été réellement la vision propre de la mission selon *Africae Munus* ?

a) *Africae Munus et la mission comme réconciliation*

Le thème de la réconciliation se situe dans la continuité de la première assemblée spéciale pour l'Afrique du Synode des Evêques et prévoit une évaluation des résultats obtenus à tous les niveaux en favorisant, bien évidemment, la dimension ecclésiale. Depuis la dernière assise synodale, la situation a considérablement changé. Cette nouvelle réalité requiert un examen

approprié en vue d'un effort renouvelé d'évangélisation exigeant un approfondissement de quelques thèmes spécifiques importants pour le présent et l'avenir de l'Eglise catholique sur le grand continent africain. La réconciliation, don de Dieu que les hommes doivent implorer et accueillir, est un fondement stable sur lequel construire la paix, condition indispensable pour le progrès des hommes et de la société selon le projet de justice voulu par Dieu. Toutefois, l'importance du fondement spirituel de la réconciliation est Christologique, parce que les initiatives de toute sorte de réconciliation viennent de Dieu. C'est pourquoi, comme affirme Léonard Santedi, les stratégies de l'Eglise pour la réconciliation dans la société doivent dépasser la manière dont le monde résout ces problèmes⁶. Pour le synode, la réconciliation avec Dieu est la voie qui conduit à la réconciliation avec les peuples. Ainsi, les filles et fils d'Afrique sont donc appelés à surmonter les handicaps de leur situation afin de construire une Afrique de réconciliation, de justice et de paix. *Africae Munus* est retenue comme une véritable hymne à l'espérance et à l'engagement au service de la réconciliation sur le continent africain, parce que ce document ne manquera pas d'apporter aux Eglises d'Afrique un souffle nouveau pour qu'elle devienne comme le confirme Benoît XVI: "le poumon spirituel pour une humanité qui semble en crise de foi et d'espérance"⁷. L'invitation à la réconciliation après tant de difficultés sociopolitiques, ethniques, économiques ou écologiques que connaît le continent devient plus urgente. Ainsi la mission de l'Eglise-famille de Dieu en Afrique devient une mission prophétique par laquelle l'Eglise doit annoncer le projet de Dieu sur la société africaine (vision de Dieu sur l'Afrique), dénoncer les contre-valeurs et les maux, et ensuite s'engager au nom de Dieu aux côtés du peuple⁸.

⁶ Cf. H. DERROITTE - F. YUMBA, (ed) *Les Eglises d'Afrique face aux enjeux de la justice et de la paix. Les leçons du deuxième synode africain*, Editions Karthala, Paris, 2015, 69.

⁷ Cf. A. B. FAYE, « Quand le genre s'invite à la Seconde Assemblée du Synode pour l'Afrique ! », in M. CHEZA, *Le deuxième Synode africain. Réconciliation, justice et paix*, Editions Karthala, Paris, 2013, 373.

⁸ Cf. A.M, 9, 11, 13, 21.

⁴ Se référant aux n. 20, 32, 59, 114 et 117 de l'*Instrumentum laboris*, plusieurs intervenants ont souligné l'importance de prendre en compte l'immense contribution des femmes dans l'Eglise.

⁵ Cf. *Instrumentum laboris* du synode de 2009, Cité du Vatican, 20.

b) *L'identification de la mission
de la femme dans l'Africae munus*

L'Église ayant reçu dans la personne des Apôtres une mission universelle qui ne connaît pas de limites a été "envoyée pour révéler et communiquer l'amour de Dieu à tous les hommes et à tous les peuples de la terre"⁹. *Africae Munus* nous appelle donc à élargir les chantiers de notre mission en pastorale de l'homme, en incluant toutes ses relations interpersonnelles, ses structures, les institutions et les relations avec les autres croyants. Dans ce grand mouvement de la mission prophétique, les femmes ne sont pas en reste. Leur mission est tellement identifiée et importante qu'elles sont en effet exhortées par les pères synodaux à être de pionnières audacieuses et courageuses dans la mission de l'incarnation de l'Évangile dans la situation critique de leur société (Afrique) ; d'être des femmes de dialogue entre la culture et l'Évangile, des promotrices de la nouvelle culture chrétienne née de ce dialogue et ensuite d'être les privilégiées avocates de l'évangélisation et du développement¹⁰. Le témoignage de nombreuses chrétiennes dans des situations de conflits confirme bien le fait que le génie féminin assumé dans l'Esprit du Christ est générateur d'une culture de paix, de vie et d'humanité¹¹. L'exhortation veut impliquer les femmes dans cette mission en affirmant qu'elles ont beaucoup de talents et dons ; elles sont des "piliers" dans l'Église et dans la société en termes de nombre et d'activité. C'est pour cela que *l'Africae Munus* lance un appel à la société afin de permettre à la femme l'accès à l'éducation et à d'autres formes de développement humain¹². Toutefois, quel rôle a joué la femme dans le processus de la réconciliation dans la société traditionnelle *béti* ?

2. Les femmes dans le processus de
réconciliation: cas du peuple Béti

Depuis l'époque coloniale, plusieurs observateurs étrangers ou africains ont écrit plusieurs ouvrages sur le peuple *Béti ou Pahouin* en général. Ce peuple se retrouve aujourd'hui en Afrique Centrale: Cameroun, Gabon, Congo, Guinée Equatoriale. Avant l'arrivée des Européens, le peuple *Béti* était animiste. C'est à la fin du XIX^e siècle que les religions chrétiennes (Protestantisme et Catholicisme) arrivent chez les *béti*, ainsi prit fin certaines croyances animistes. Le peuple *Béti* en général est un groupe ethnique présent au Centre et Sud du Cameroun. Ce sont des descendants de *Bantous ou Pahouin* aux quels Philippe Laburthe-Tolra rattache les *Béti*, les *Bulu*, et les *Fang* du Sud du Cameroun, de Guinée Equatoriale et du Gabon¹³. Mais l'origine des *béti* est complexe à définir, car c'est un groupe ethnique qui a subi le choc d'une acculturation récente encore présente dans toutes les mémoires¹⁴. Plus communément admise est l'origine donnée par la tradition orale. Les *béti* se caractérisent par une unité linguistique, une organisation socio-politique et des valeurs économiques communes. La structure sociale et politique chez les *béti* se caractérise par trois éléments essentiels : la liberté (dans le sens que tous les hommes sont égaux), les *béti* sont des hommes libres et capables de se défendre par leurs propres moyens; et l'espace *béti* est celui de liberté à grande tendance égalitaire où les groupes sociaux sont établis en fonction de la parenté. La parenté (c'est-à-dire les seules structures que l'on trouve en pays *béti* sont la famille étendue, le lignage et la tribu). La structure sociale dominante de la société *béti* comme tout le reste des *Bantou* est le patriarcat et le matriarcat comme réalité familiale¹⁵. La société *beti* est sans pouvoir central, composée de grands lignages patrilinéaires appelés *Mvog*, ne connais-

⁹ Cf. *ibidem* 10.

¹⁰ Cf. G. WIRBA, « The contribution of African religious women in service to peace, justice and reconciliation », in J. NDI OKALLA, *Le deuxième synode africain face aux défis socio-économiques et éthiques du continent*, Editions Karthala, Paris, 1995, 170-180.

¹¹ Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris* du Synode de 2009, chapitre 4.

¹² Cf. *ibidem*, 137.

¹³ Cf. P. LABURTHE-TOLRA, *Initiations et sociétés secrètes au Cameroun : essai sur la religion béti*, Karthala, Paris, 1985, 47.

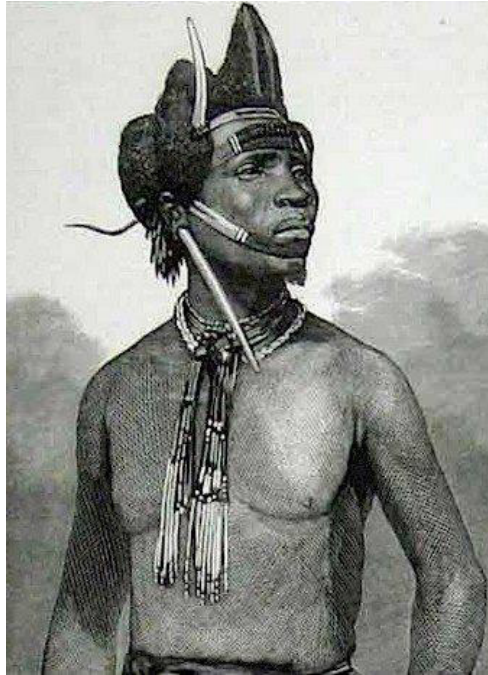
¹⁴ Cf. *ibidem*, 52.

¹⁵ Cf. G.B. MELOBO, *Extrait de Thèse de doctorat sur l'approche théologico-Liturgique d'une inculturation du vendredi saint en Afrique : l'exemple de l'Esani chez les Béti du Cameroun*, Rome, 2013, 21.

sant guère d'autres liens que ceux du sang et de l'alliance. Chez les *béti*, la prééminence est basée sur la filiation et déterminée par la séniorité¹⁶. Mais, quel est le modèle de la pratique de la réconciliation chez les *béti* ?

a) *La Palabre comme modèle de pratique de la réconciliation chez les Béti*

La pratique de la célébration de la réconciliation chez les peuples *Béti* est précédée par le rite de la palabre (discussion). La palabre, incontestablement constitue une donnée fondamentale des sociétés africaines et l'expression la plus évidente de la vitalité d'une culture de paix. Loin d'être un discours ou un verbiage oiseux, la palabre africaine est une procédure intégrante de la vie et de la société traditionnelle; elle est un agir interactif. C'est une assemblée ouverte avec une mission holistique, c'est-à-dire celle de trouver les solutions à certains problèmes individuels, familiaux ou communautaires à travers une discussion¹⁷. En Afrique noire, les modalités de la palabre varient d'une tradition à l'autre mais elle garde les mêmes bases et principes¹⁸. Qu'il s'agisse d'une célébration au sein de la famille, lors d'un mariage, d'une vente ou d'un règlement d'un différend, d'un conflit, la palabre demeure une des institutions fortes de vie démocratique, de restauration de la justice, de la paix et de l'harmonie dans les sociétés africaines traditionnelles¹⁹. La palabre est convoquée par une autorité, un ancien ou un chef de



clan. Elle rassemble des individus, un clan, une famille, un village ou une ethnie.

Dans la tribu *béti*, la palabre peut être publique ou privée selon la gravité de la faute. Elle est privée quand elle n'engage que des membres d'une parenté familiale ou clanique et publique quand les membres d'autres familles ou clans sont impliqués. La palabre se tient toujours en un lieu chargé de symbole à cet effet tous ces endroits sont marqués du sceau de la sacralité.

Chez les *Béti*, elle peut se tenir sous un arbre, dans une cours, mais se tient le plus souvent quand elle est privée dans l'*abââ* (grande maison de l'homme servant de la salle de séjour et de prétoire) et jamais dans ou devant une cuisine, car la palabre ne pourrait se tenir sous des emblèmes féminins sans soulever de problème juridique²⁰.

Prenant l'exemple du déroulement de la palabre chez les *béti*, pas moins de six conditions et modalités constituent un préalable à toute *palabre* : où, quand, qui, quoi, pour-quoi, comment? La palabre chez les *béti* dirigée généralement par le chef du clan ou l'oncle maternel selon que la palabre est privée ou publique et comprend trois grands moments: le premier moment est le rassemblement et rappel de la norme sociale qui rappelle l'histoire du clan ou les relations qui unissent les deux clans et les normes ancestrales; le deuxième moment, le constat d'un conflit, l'aveu et l'intercession de la communauté ; le troisième moment est le rite de réconciliation²¹. Les débats de la palabre se tiennent en présence des membres du village, des sages, des notables et dignitaires de la cour du chef et on peut aussi inviter des chefs des clans voisins si besoin se fait sentir. Ces notables et dignitaires possédant leurs insignes du pouvoir (canne et chasse-mouche) doivent avoir une intégrité de vie, d'une loyauté irrépro-

¹⁶ Cf. P. LABURTHE-TOLRA, *Les seigneurs de la forêt. Essai sur le passé historique, l'organisation sociale et les normes éthiques des anciens Béti du Cameroun*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 1981, 47-51.

¹⁷ Cf. F. A. OBORJI, *Mission and reconciliation, theology and pastoral challenges of social violence*, Aracne, Roma 2015, 294-295.

¹⁸ Cf. I. B. PESA, *Ethique communicationnelle de la palabre africaine*, Série XXIII Théologie, Vol./Bd. 924, Peter Lang, Bruxelles, 2011, 13.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, 13.

²⁰ Cf. J.G. BIDIMA, *La palabre, une juridiction de la parole*, 12.

²¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 28.

chable, d'une grande sagesse confirmée et connaisseurs de la tradition du clan. Après la sentence, la palabre ne s'arrête pas pour autant, car le tout n'est pas de dédommager ou être sanctionné, mais de nouer la relation, de retrouver l'équilibre perdu et l'unité des membres dans le clan. La palabre se sert donc du vrai pour aboutir à la paix ; son enjeu en effet n'est pas la justice à appliquer en faveur d'un individu, mais l'harmonie à instaurer au sein d'une communauté²². Ainsi débute la démarche de la réconciliation. La réconciliation chez les *béti* est définie comme *le rétablissement de bonnes relations entre les parties* afin de pouvoir progressivement fermer la porte au cycle des hostilités et pour vivre en harmonie. Elle s'inscrit dans une approche inclusive de la résolution du conflit. En termes de justice par exemple, elle recherchera donc la réhabilitation et la réintégration sociale, plutôt que l'exclusion punitive. Le rite de réconciliation chez les *béti* est l'*ésié*. A travers ce rite, on résout les conflits entre individu, famille ou clan. Ce rite de la réconciliation *ésié* se déroule en deux étapes: premièrement, les antagonistes se lavent les mains tous dans un même bassin et au même moment (symbole d'une origine commune et de recours à la même tradition, aux mêmes ancêtres); l'eau ayant servi à laver les mains pour ainsi se purifier est jetée au sol, entraînant avec elle toutes les fautes et toutes les souillures. Ensuite, le partage de la noix de cola et le vin de palme en signe de restauration des liens et une part est versée au sol à l'intention des ancêtres. Puis ils se donnent la main après que le chef du clan a prononcé la parole d'autorité et de bénédiction sur eux, achevant ainsi la première étape de la réconciliation. Deuxièmement un bon repas de communion et pacification est servi et partagé. C'est le temps par excellence de partage et de solidarité. Le sang du coq ou du bouc immolé est versé au sol, la viande ou la chair est préparée pour nourrir les membres en vue de la "réconciliation". Les ancêtres sont toujours supposés participer à la cérémonie ainsi le vin et les aliments sont versés au sol à leur intention²³. Enfin c'est le moment de la fête pendant lequel se clôture la palabre par les chants, la danse et la joie. La vie peut re-

prendre en toute fraternité et confiance. Ce rite était aussi célébré pour obtenir la guérison d'une personne malade de la famille. Dans le rituel de l'*ésié*, quel a été le rôle qu'avait la femme *béti* dans cette assemblée ?

b) *Le rôle des femmes béti dans le processus de la réconciliation*

La place de la femme dans les assemblées palabriques diffère d'une région à une autre : dans certaines régions, les femmes prennent directement part à la prise de décisions dans la palabre *agonistique*, dans d'autres comme la palabre *irénique* ou extra-familiales et/ou administrative, elles sont conseillères de leurs hommes en dehors des rassemblements. Dans le cas de la femme *béti*, elle prend beaucoup plus part dans la palabre *agonistique*, elle est conseillère de son époux et quelques fois prend part à la palabre *agonistique* si besoin se fait sentir. Dans chaque famille, une femme est responsable de toutes les autres et à ce titre, elle est avant tout la responsable directe pour ce qui concerne les femmes. Elle tient le conseil des femmes sur la vie du monde féminin. Au regard de ce qui précède, constatons que la pratique de la réconciliation chez les *béti* comprend deux grandes étapes: la première est la palabre qui consiste à révéler l'offense commise par une partie, puis la reconnaissance de l'offense, la justice, la miséricorde et la paix afin de réinstaurer l'harmonie sociale dans le respect mutuel. La deuxième étape est la célébration de la réconciliation en union avec les ancêtres qui participent aussi à l'évènement. Nous remarquons que la femme *béti*, de par sa présence pas trop visible mais nécessaire dans ce rite apporte une grande contribution à la famille (clan) et dans la société traditionnelle avec ses nombreux talents. Suite à cette description de la femme dans son milieu traditionnel, quelle est la nouveauté dans la perception du rôle et de la place de la femme dans la société et dans l'Eglise pour une mission au féminin?

3. Conclusion et perspectives pour une mission au féminin

La mission comme réconciliation selon *Africae Munus* s'insère dans la mission prophétique de l'Eglise-famille de Dieu en Afrique. C'est en

²² Cf. *ibidem*, 19, 20.

²³ Cf. *ibidem*, 28.

ce sens que l'Eglise est invitée à confier à la femme une mission plus visible en les impliquant de manière franche. Ainsi, elles humaniseraient davantage les sociétés africaines et participeront d'une manière ou d'une autre dans les processus de réconciliation; le rite *ésié* en est un exemple concret. Ce rite *ésié* de la réconciliation chez les *béti* est nécessaire parce qu'il permet de réinstaurer une bonne harmonie dans la famille ou le clan. Cependant, il connaît des limites dans le sens où les sacrifices d'animaux (bouc, coq) sont faits en signe de purification, ce qui n'est pas compatible avec le christianisme qui a pour seul et unique sacrifice Suprême que celui de Jésus Christ. C'est pourquoi, *Africae Munus* a insisté sur l'importance du sacrement de la réconciliation.

Partant donc des orientations de *l'Africae Munus* et de la tradition *Béti* sur la mission de la femme, l'Eglise du Cameroun est invitée à revaloriser le rôle de la femme dans le processus de la réconciliation en utilisant des structures en place ou en créant d'autres telles que : la famille, les mouvements de l'apostolat des laïcs des femmes, en l'occurrence de l'action chrétienne des foyers (ACF), des dames apostoliques et de la Catholic Women's Association Cameroon (CWA). De plus, les congrégations religieuses et les instituts de vie consacrées sont des lieux privilégiés d'actuation de ces orientations du Synode surtout dans les processus de réconciliation. Ainsi, en témoignant des valeurs du royaume des cieux et en vivant pleinement leur vocation, elles permettront aux autres femmes une plus grande expression de leur génie féminin. C'est dans ce sillage que la mission de la femme se confirme en sa qualité de mère, éducatrice et médiatrice efficace dans le processus de réconciliation. La mission de la femme telle que présentée par *l'Africae Munus* et son rôle dans le processus de réconciliation chez les *béti*, trouvent leur sens dans la mission réalisée par Jésus lui-même. En effet dans l'accomplissement de sa mission, Jésus possède une grande sensibilité envers les femmes et par rapport aux traits féminins de sa propre personnalité. Lorsque nous tentons de reconstituer l'attitude de Jésus vis-à-vis des femmes nous

observons qu'il a conscience de leur présence au sein de son audience. Jésus tire ses exemples de la vie des femmes, non moins que de celle des hommes. Il raconte des paraboles où, à une histoire concernant une femme, succède une autre mettant en scène un homme par exemple : la ménagère qui mélange le levain à la pâte / le fermier qui plante une graine de moutarde (Luc 13, 18-21). La femme qui a perdu une pièce d'argent / le berger qui a perdu une brebis (Luc 15, 3-10) etc. Il était très conscient des préoccupations des femmes et reconnaissait à travers leurs besoins, et à travers les suggestions qu'elles faisaient, les impulsions de l'Esprit. Il était conscient que le pardon et la réconciliation qu'il apportait de la part de son Père étaient destinés aussi bien aux femmes qu'aux hommes. Parce qu'il donne la vie, le Christ est plus féminin que masculin. Il agit en d'autres termes, sous un symbole « féminin », c'est-à-dire qui donne la vie ; c'est ici le sens de la mission au féminin, une mission appelée à donner la vie. C'est à la suite du Christ que la mission au féminin se définit et prend acte. La mission principale de la femme est de donner la vie, la protéger et d'éduquer ; elle est donc responsable de la procréation de l'humanité. Pour les pères du synode de l'Afrique, les femmes sont dotées par le Seigneur d'innombrables talents qui font d'elles des protagonistes crédibles, telle une sève dans un arbre, pour la reconstruction d'une Afrique nouvelle. Pour réussir cette mission prophétique au service de la réconciliation, il est indispensable pour l'Eglise en Afrique de faire la théologie profonde de la femme, qui consiste à approfondir la réflexion sur sa place dans la maternité surnaturelle de l'Eglise qui est en continuité avec la vision de la femme dans la plupart des cultures africaines que la mission chrétienne est appelée non seulement à valoriser mais aussi à transformer en suivant les enseignements du Christ qui est venu pour que les hommes aient la vie et qu'ils l'aient en abondance (cfr. Jn 10, 10).

We thank the author who sent this article to be published in the Sedos Bulletin.

The Impact of Widowhood Rite on the Ghanaian Woman in the New Millennium

A Call to Action in the Christian Milieu

Introduction

Culture, it said, is a vehicle for national development. In this sense, it becomes a panacea and tool that could be exploited for any country's development. But is that always the case that culture is a vehicle and a tool for national development? The answer is obviously no. There are certain negative cultural practices which are inimical, dehumanizing and infringe on the fundamental human rights of people who become victims to such cultural practices. It must be pointed out that, the practice of widowhood rite is not only dehumanizing but infringes upon the fundamental human rights of victims. No wonder the constitution of Ghana and International conventions have totally condemned such barbaric acts.

Widowhood can be defined as the status of an individual who was legally married to someone who subsequently died. In this study there is a kind of imbalance in the performance of widowhood rites in the Ghanaian society. The men enjoy more freedom in the performing of the rite than women. If a man refuses to perform the rite there is no public outcry but if a woman refuses she is blended with all sorts of taunting and considered as having hand in the death of her husband. Despite the air of change blowing in our society concerning the position of women, there is more to be done to liberate them from oppressive mechanism laid down by the culture. According to Seán Ruth (2006), this mistreatment of women sometimes blocks women from self-development and excluded them from participation in true marital life and in society because they do not have certain rights that the men take for granted. Economically, the death of a spouse will result in loss of

income and property that the deceased spouse received or owned, unless provision for their continuation and inheritance is made explicit in income program rules, laws of inheritance, or through the deceased spouse's will. For this reason, it is important to understand how marriage and inheritance rights to income and assets are defined in law and by programs that provide income to elderly persons.

The issue of widowhood rites, which has been described as one of the most dehumanizing, uncivilized and negative cultural practices in the world, due to its associated violation of the rights of women, is still rife in Ghana. Women who undergo such rites are subjected to mental, physical, and emotional torture, accused of killing their husbands. Thousands of women have undergone multiple human rights violations in the name of culture, and dehumanizing customary practices. Most of the widowhood rites were being spearheaded by women who suppress the widows, torture, strip them naked, shave their hairs, and force them to drink concoctions prepared with leaves, hairs and finger nails of their late husbands.

Apart from forcing the widows to sleep with the corpse for three or more days, most of the women and their children are also denied food and shelter. The multiple human rights violations widows and their children go through in this part of the globe, in the name of culture, has led widows into extreme poverty, migration, social oppression, with many children being denied access to education and health. A lot of widows and their children are denied their autonomy and independence. Most of the widows, who could not stand the humiliation, beatings, and other ill-treatment, sometimes commit suicide.

Despite the fact that the customary practice of widowhood rites dehumanizes widows, is injurious to them and also violates their fundamental human rights and dignity, these rites continue to prevail in Ghana. The worrisome and disturbing aspect of this phenomenon is that in contemporary Ghana, the practice of widowhood rites is pervasive and shows no sign of abating in the nearest future. The constitutional arrangements mentioned earlier have proven beyond doubt to be inadequate in protecting widows in Ghana because the practice persists and is on the ascendancy. Today in Ghana some widows are stripped naked before the full glare of the public while others are made to sleep alone with the corpse of their late husbands. One would expect that in an era such as now, obnoxious practices such as those described, should become extinct. Unfortunately, at this time widowhood practices are increasing in Ghana. This assertion that the practice of widowhood rites is on the increase in Ghana is neither a fabrication nor an exaggeration. It is a fact that no one can contest. Hundreds of both electronic and printed media reports attest to it.

As if losing your husband and your loved one is not causing enough sadness and grief for a woman staying behind, the sad situation does not end here but often becomes worse. Millions of widows in the world endure extreme poverty, banishment, violence, homelessness, health problems and discrimination. Furthermore these women are often blamed for their husband's death and accused of witchcraft. Sometimes widows are seen as impure and are not allowed to touch things. They are not protected by special laws and often their human rights are violated. To give special recognition to the plight of widows in order to restore their human rights and alleviate poverty through empowerment, the United Nations declared its first international Widows Day on 23 June 2011. This was necessary since once widowed, women in many countries often confront a denial of inheritance and land rights, degrading and life-threatening mourning and burial rites and other forms of widow abuse. In many countries, a woman's social status is inextricably linked to her husband's, so that when her husband dies, a woman no longer has a place in society. For many, the loss of a husband is only the first trauma in a

long-term ordeal. Widows around the world share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced economic circumstances. The state of widowhood is worsened by situations of poverty, armed conflict and lack of access to services and resources.

African widows, irrespective of ethnic groups, are amongst the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region. In Africa, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS have brought widowhood to millions of women. The inhuman treatment put on the widows varies per culture. Most of the treatments are geared towards dehumanizing their victims which is always a painful and psychological experience that can affect the individual throughout their life time. Widowhood rites may involve both physical and psychological violence to the widow. Examples of these are that a woman has to shave her hair, wear black clothes for a long time as sign of mourning and is not allowed to bath or change clothes in some communities. Some of these practices could be dangerous for a woman's life and safety; in some cases a woman has to swallow concoctions or other dangerous substances to prove her innocence regarding her husband's death. Sometimes she is required to participate in sacrificial rituals which may involve her exposure to physical harm as where she has to take long treks on lonely paths alone in the night or the widow has to drink the water in which their husband's corpse has been washed. Some were forced to travel outside their communities in order to have sexual intercourse with unknown man at the end of the rite in order to shelve herself from the bad omen of the widowhood rite.

Towards Raising of Awareness

Widows' voices must be heard, their needs addressed and their key roles as sole supporters of families properly acknowledged and supported. Widows are growing in numbers every day due to armed conflict, the AIDS pandemic, violence, harmful traditional practices and natural disasters: as a result there are many child widows as well as young mothers alongside the traditional, widowed grandmother. There have been a range of international conventions and resolutions relating to women's rights which have been ratified, as well as the enactment of

domestic laws reflecting these international standards. However African governments have been slow to address the status of widows; to protect them from violence, ensure their access to justice and enjoyment of their fundamental human rights. In many ethnic groups widows' lives are determined by local interpretations of customary and traditional law, and these tend to be highly discriminatory of widows. In many ethnic groups widows and their daughters suffer intense vilification and are regarded as the "evil eye" bringing bad luck. Furthermore, coercive mourning and burial rites are often not merely degrading but actually life-threatening, such with ritual cleansing (sexual intercourse with designated male relatives), which can spread the AIDS virus and result in unwanted pregnancies. Ghana has added to its penal laws articles criminalizing "harmful burial rites", but few if any prosecutions have taken place and it is unclear who is to define what traditions are harmful and which are neutral or benign.

The African culturally has derogatory attitudes towards women. The physical or psychological violence directed against the woman, the socially induced feminine low self-image, political, economic and even religious intolerance and exploitation, the depriving of women of educational opportunities, denying them the chances to develop their full potential as human beings, the perpetuating of customs and laws that not only discriminate against women but also mutilate or completely eliminate their common right to avail themselves of the opportunities of modern science and technology – all these are calculated attempts at blacking out women, rendering them invisible. They are forms of human degradation that can be identified in varying degrees in the existential experiences of women in Africa. On the dignity and role of man and woman, John Paul II has this to say: "In creating the human race 'male and female' (Gen. 1:27), God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person." This means that man and woman, although different, are essentially equal from the point of view of their humanity. However, this is usually not so in the Ghanaian family. Here the culture finds it difficult to appreciate and accept this fact. Women are usually deprived of their rights

and the respect due to them. This must be deplored.

In a report on violence against women in Ghana, the United Nations (UN) Division for the Advancement of Women indicated that widowhood rites included confining the widow to a room, shaving her head, having her wear a rope around her neck and conducting a ritual bath (11-14 Apr. 2005). The report also stated that "... 31% of widowed respondents said they were being asked to marry their dead husband's brother and 23% of the other respondents said their relatives (who are widowed) were asked to marry their dead husband's brother" (UN 11-14 Apr. 2005). No information regarding the consequences for refusing to marry the customary successor of the sub-chief could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. Sources reported that widowhood rites are prohibited under Ghana's penal code (Accra Daily Mail March 1, 2006). However, according to Ayageba, founder of Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM), many widows are not aware of this legislation and those who are will likely not want to proceed to trial because of lengthy delays and because they could face "more and increased abuse" (ibid.).

Loss of Property

After their husband's death many women suffer abuse and exploitation by family members, often about property and/or land. Often these women lose their social status and are excluded from social life. Widows are often evicted from their homes and physically abused, some even killed, even by members of their own family. Widows with children often have to withdraw their children from schools and to rely on their labor. The poverty of widows often is increased by illiteracy and a lack of education. Their access to income generating opportunities is therefore severely restricted. Furthermore cultural taboos, negative stereotyping, seclusion, mourning dress codes and the burden of childcare may impede younger widows from participating in projects or working in the public domains. In many countries ways that widows cope with this situation include: putting children into child labor, begging, being exploited in jobs and eventually rework. In some countries widows have

successfully formed strength groups to become self-supporting.

Widowhood Rites

A widow is a woman whose husband has died and who has not married again. In other words, a widow is a married woman who has been deprived of her legal husband as a result of death. The African woman remains victims of harmful traditional rites that are associated with the passing away of their beloved spouses. Deaths even in circumstances in which the causes are natural and explicable are never perceived as such. In Africa death is attributed to magico-religious factors and widows are targets of accusations of bewitchment or sorcery and are as such blamed for the death of their beloved partners (Ugweuze, 1997). Widowhood can be described as the state or period of a widow or widower, it is necessary to note that naturally it is good to mourn one's late husband but this can be done without subjecting the late man's wife to torture and infringement on her fundamental human rights that can lead to her death.

Perhaps the most abhorrent treatment of the Ghanaian woman is the ritual of widowhood. One can identify the following common characteristics of the ritual of widowhood: Sitting on the floor for a number of days before and after burial; keeping the hair unkempt for a period before complete shaving. Being forbidden to take a bath for a period of seven days or more; confinement almost imprisonment within the deceased husband's homestead; compulsory wailing and recounting of husband's virtues; wearing black cloth; being forbidden to inherit the husband's property; being forbidden to have

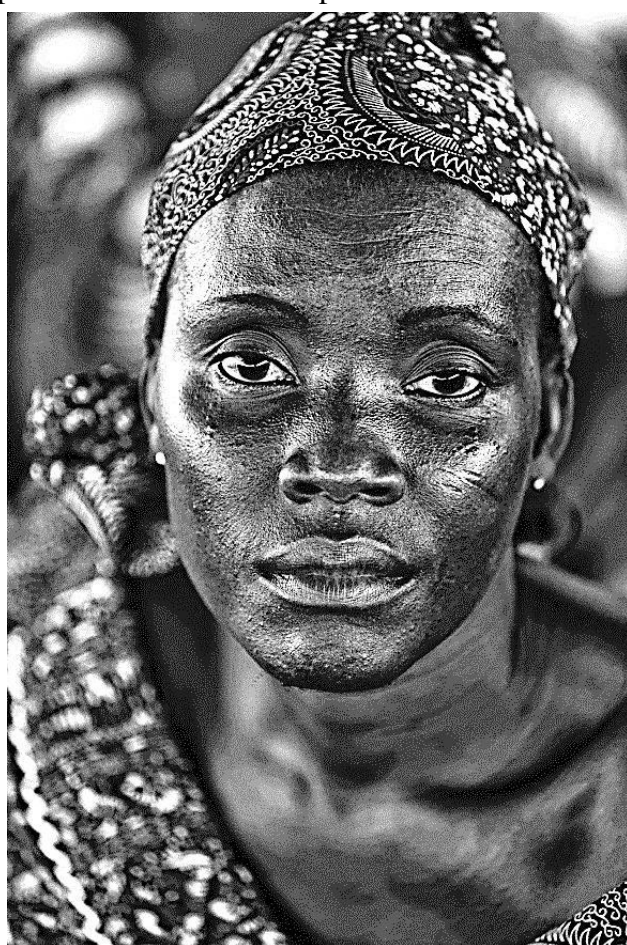
sexual intercourse for a year after burial; public confession of guilt should one have an affair and then a sacrifice to appease the deceased husband; presentation of items such as a goat, fish, drinks, plantain, yams, to the elders of the family to be permitted to terminate the mourning ordeal.

In some of the unique cases in Ghana, the widow's ordeal begins with the people's suspicion that the widow is responsible for the husband's death. Among the Ewes of the Volta Region of Ghana, the widow cannot trim her toe or finger nails nor wear shoes during the mourning period. While the widow is subjected to these

indignities, a widower is not. He can remarry, if he so wishes, at will. These acts of oppression, humiliation and dehumanization of women identified in one aspect of Ghanaian culture, namely social organization, are observable in other aspects of culture and are themselves part of the culture of Ghanaian womanhood with which inculturation is to engage the Gospel of Liberation in meaningful dialogue.

Widowhood rites differ from ethnic group, but in most African societies no matter what form they take, they pose a

problem for the women, especially those who are not well educated and those in the rural areas. The question of the widowhood rites makes it clear that here we have a problem that faces African women who are Christians. Must they comply with the traditional widowhood rites even if certain aspects of those rites are incompatible with Christian morality? In many African societies widowhood rites create all kinds of moral and psychological problems for the widow. However, it will simply not do to say that



African Christians should not take part in these rites. They form part and parcel of the people's way of life and banning Christians from them will not work. Is the solution to evolve a Church rite that will replace the traditional rite? This cultural captivity of African womanhood calls for the liberating force of the Gospel.

The Inculturation of the Rite of Widowhood

In the year 2000, I personally led a crusade in educating the faithful in the Diocese of Ho of Ghana about the harmful effects of the customary traditional practice of widowhood rites. Invariably, it is also not in consonance with the Christian belief system. With vigorous campaign and educating the people, the Catholic Church in the Ho Diocese has evolved a Christian ritual for widows and widowers. Through that effort, I have also formed the Association of Widows and Widowers in the Diocese of Ho with the blessings and support of the Bishop, Most Rev. Francis Anani Kofi Lodonu, the then Bishop of the Diocese. The association is to help educate the widows and widowers which ultimately serves as a leverage between the widows/widowers and the community at large. In this ritual both widows and widowers go through the same ritual with the same length of time, which is pegged at three months. There is no discrimination as regards the performance of the rites. This is an example of inculturation because in making the rite, the Church in this part of Ghana has taken into account the cultural context of the Ewe people as far as widowhood rites are concerned. The rite is called "Initiation into Widowhood: A Ritual for Catholic Widows/Widowers in the Ho Diocese." We highlight the main features here. The ritual is divided into three parts. Part one deals with "Initiation into Widowhood." Part Two deals with the clothing of the widow/widowers. Part Three deals with the "Outdooring" of the Widow/Widower.

Initiation into Widowhood

In this first part of the rite, the widow or widower is to be initiated into a three-day retreat which corresponds to solitary confinement in the traditional rite. This starts either from the day after the public mourning or the day after the burial. On that day the priest enters the house of the widow with other faithful in the community where they pray with the widow or widower. The priest sprinkles the house with holy water, imposes his hands on the widow and prays for her. A bit of her hair is cut to be disposed of later by the priest. This replaces the shaving of the widow's head and her private parts in the traditional rite. The widow or widower then begins the three-day retreat. During this three days' period of confinement the widow or widower is encouraged to read the Bible or ask someone to read it to her or his hearing and meditate on it; to pray the rosary daily and also pray other Christian and private prayers.

Clothing of the Widow and Widower

On the third day, the priest with some faithful goes to the house of the widow or widower and the priest blesses the black clothes to be used by her or him. The prayer said mentions protection against assault or temptation of wicked spirits. Then from this time onwards the widow or widower is free to do any work or engage in any commerce that can help fend for herself or himself. Emphasis is laid on good moral behavior throughout the period and beyond. After three months, a day is fixed for the taking off of the mourning clothes. During the period of three months of widowhood, it is recommended that the widow lead a modest and a chaste life. Consultation of diviners and following any traditional prescription is forbidden.

The Outdooring of the Widow and Widower

On a day, preferably Saturday the widow presents the new white clothes to the priest to be blessed in Church. After the homily on that day, the priest blesses the clothes and then presents them to the widow or widower who then changes it with the black one she or he was using dur-

ing the mourning period. The change of clothing is done in the sacristy and then she or he returns to join the rest for the continuation of the Mass. She or he is given special blessings after Mass and that ends the widowhood rites. She will wear those on the following Sunday. At mass the next day, just before the final blessing, the priest may give the widow or widower special blessing. There are some people who are skeptical whether widows who go through such a Church rite will think that they have fulfilled the obligations that their traditional society requires of them. To these skeptics, continuous education is the panacea to their plights.

Recommendations

The presentation found out that younger widows experienced more psychological effects of widowhood rites than the older ones. In view of this it is recommended that such widows should be screened and given the appropriate counseling. Furthermore, widowhood practices that subject the widows to psychological trauma should be eliminated by the traditional authorities. It was also found out that younger widows encountered more economic hardships after the death of the spouses as compared to the older ones. In view of this, special attention should be given to them by Non-Governmental Organizations to enhance their economic lives. Finally both age groups of the widows have low social status as a result of the widowhood rituals they go through. Based on this it is recommended that the District Assemblies, Traditional Authorities, Non-Governmental Organizations, Christians and Gender Based Organizations should come together and abolished some of the widowhood rites that tend to reduce the social status of the widows.

Conclusion

As has been stated in this paper, women's rights in general have gained considerable attention from the UN and the international community. As a result, women's rights all over the world have been given increased recognition and respect. Most human rights instruments, however, do not take cognizance of specific categories of women, with special needs such as

widows. One of the reasons for this situation is because more often than not, women are treated as a homogenous group. The plight of widows in Ghana and other parts of Africa have shown that a lot remains to be done to address the needs of several categories of women in Africa. The call for a more pro-active approach in this direction is absolutely urgent when one considers the fact that Ghana has made much more progress in the protection of widows' than many other African countries. The most dehumanizing widowhood rites occur as a result of the inequalities between men and women. Widowhood rites are thus another classic form of discrimination against women. This state of affairs is attributable to certain perceptions that these practices are an integral part of custom and culture and must therefore be acceptable.

To enable any nation make any progress in promoting the human rights of widows, there is a need for education. The process of legal literacy aims at creating awareness, through human rights education, among different stakeholders in the society. This is to enable them to understand and practice the human rights culture in any given society. Legal literacy may be used to enhance the rights of widows in the society. Prominent among the stakeholders who need education about the rights of widows are the government agencies, the legislature, the judiciary, members of the media, lawyers, teachers, traditional and religious leaders, and most importantly widows themselves. Apart from seminars, workshops and symposia, the media may also be used as a veritable tool in educating the whole of civil society and the masses about widowhood rites and projecting the rights of widows to all facets of the society.

Widows are humans and as such they need a fair treatment from their spouse, relatives and members of the community; these rites which are considered appropriate by the culture are most of the time detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the widows and their offspring; therefore, the rites to a large extent need to be dropped to enable women to live normally despite the exit of their husbands. Conclusively, people are gradually gaining awareness of the harmful effect of harmful widowhood practices in our communities. Some African nations have already enacted law prohibiting harmful wid-

owhood practices. The act spells out different situation whereby people can be convicted when they disobey the law. The content of the law should be publicized. So that people will be aware of their rights and duties under the law. The government should set machinery in motion to implement the law.

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*The photo at page 30 is taken from:
<https://mamazimbi.wordpress.com/tag/mama-zimbi>

DOCUMENTS

Apostolic Exhortation

AFRICAЕ MUNUS (Africa's Commitment)

(Simplified version of AMECEA)

PART ONE

“See, I am making all things new” (Rev 21, 5)

The first part of *Africae Munus* focuses on God's eternal design to reconcile all people to Himself in Christ Jesus and how the Holy Spirit continue to work in the Church in order to bring about communion with God and unity among peoples. The main pillars of this mission of the Church are seeking the paths reconciliation, justice and peace. In two chapters, the Exhortation proposes to all Christians the operative theological guidelines for the particular Churches. (cfr. AM 14)

Chapter One

***“In Service to Reconciliation,
Justice and Peace”***

In this chapter Pope Benedict XVI reflects on the discussions of the Synod Fathers and proposes what must animate the pastoral and missionary dynamism of the Church in Africa in her pursuit of the paths of reconciliation, justice and peace. The chapter is divided into four sections:

1) “Authentic servants of God's Word”. (AM 15-16)

The Apostolic Exhortation invites all Christians to listen to Jesus Christ, who challenges them through His Word, to allow themselves to be reconciled with God and

neighbor. “The reading and meditation of the Word of God root us more deeply in Christ and guide our ministry as servants of reconciliation, justice and peace” (AM 16). The Word of God is to be the conscience and wisdom for all in pursuit of building a community of reconciled individuals and authentic witnesses of Christ in the world. Authentic hearing of the Word of God is obeying and acting on it in life and society. “On our faces and in our lives, may the word of God truly take flesh” (AM 16)

2) “Christ at the heart of African life: the source of reconciliation, justice and peace” (AM 17-30).

In this section, Africa's Commitment outlines the important themes that put the life and teachings of Jesus Christ at the core of the Church's mandate to seek the paths of reconciliation, justice and peace among people and particularly in Africa.

First, the Exhortation puts it clearly that peace is the greatest gift by Jesus to his disciples. “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you” (Jn 14:27) (AM 18). Jesus is the true author of the peace that humanity longs for and which finds completion in acts of justice and reconciliation.

Second, Africa's Commitment reminds Christians that reconciliation among individuals and communities emerges from our reconciliation with God. “Be reconciled with God' (2 Cor 5,

20b)” (cf. AM 19-21). In order to create the necessary preconditions for peace, the strength of reconciliation must be instilled in people's hearts. It is the grace of God that gives us a new heart and reconciles us with him and with one another. “ Unless the power of reconciliation is created in the people's hearts, political commitment to peace lacks inner premise” (AM 19).

Therefore, the Church calls us to the inner purification of man, an essential premise for the construction of justice and peace. Only authentic reconciliation generates lasting peace in society. “It is by granting and receiving forgiveness that the traumatized memories of individuals and communities have found healing and families formerly divided have rediscovered harmony” (AM 21). Obviously, those responsible for crimes must be made to face their responsibilities, also in order that such tragedies never happen again.

The Exhortation further looks at the need for “Becoming just and building a just social order” (AM 22-27). It is the responsibility of the political sphere to create a just social order. The Church, however, has the duty to form the consciences of the men and women involved in building a society reconciled in justice and peace. Her function is to educate the world to the religious message announced by Jesus Christ. Indeed, “the model par excellence underlying the Church's thinking and reasoning, which she proposes to all, is Christ” (AM 22).

The Church is involved in the civic education of citizens, also by means of her Justice and Peace Commissions. Living in accordance with Christ's justice means undertaking to ensure that people are rendered justice – “rendering to each his due” - in the face of serious forms of injustice such as, for example, “the plundering of the goods of the earth by a minority to the detriment of entire peoples” (AM 24), which is unacceptable and immoral. Justice must be upheld by subsidiarity and solidarity, and animated by charity. “Charity, which ensures a bond with God, goes beyond distributive justice” (AM 24). Human justice is always limited and imperfect, but divine justice shows it a horizon towards which it must strive in order to be fully realized. Jesus Christ proposes a revolution, not social or political, but a revolution of love upon which the Beatitudes have their foundation. “In the

spirit of the Beatitudes, preferential attention is to be given to the poor, the hungry, the sick, ... to the stranger, the disadvantaged, the prisoner, the immigrant who is looked down upon, the refugee or displaced person” (AM 27).

The last theme in Section Two of Chapter One is “Love in truth: the source of peace” (AM 28-30). Africa's Commitment proposes that divine justice, founded on love, transcends the minimum which human justice requires and reaches unto the giving of self for others. “Let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1Jn 3:18). Societies will always have need of the love which “soothes hearts that are hurt, forlorn or abandoned. It is love which brings or restores peace to human hearts and establishes it in our midst”(AM 29).

The Church is called to make Christ's voice heard in modern Africa, inviting everyone to “be born from above” (Jn 3, 7). Faithful to the Lord's command, the Church “feels the duty to be present wherever human suffering exists and to make heard the silent cry of the innocent who suffer persecution, or of peoples whose governments mortgage the present and the future for personal interests” (AM 30). Through her ability to see the face of Christ on the face of children, the needy and all those who suffer in various ways, the Church is helping forge the new Africa.

Chapter Two

“Paths towards Reconciliation, Justice and Peace” (AM 31)

In this chapter Pope Benedict XVI reflects on the discussions of the Synod Fathers and proposes what must animate the pastoral and missionary dynamism of the Church in Africa in her pursuit of the paths of reconciliation, justice and peace. The chapter is divided into four sections:

1) “Care for the human person” (AM 32-41)

This section of Africa's Commitment covers five points: First, is the call to a “Metanoia: an authentic conversion” (AM 32). In order to be true witnesses to the Gospel of reconciliation,

justice, and peace, there must be in sincere and inner change of heart, an authentic conversion. “Did not Christ say first of all to the paralytic: ‘Your sins are forgiven’ and then ‘Rise!’” (Lk 5:20, 24).

Africa’s Commitment is challenging the gents of evangelization to embark on revising our catechesis and focus on interior change and renewal of people’s lives. That means “to seek ways of inspiring in Christ’s disciples in Africa the will to become effectively committed to living out the Gospel in their daily lives and in society” (AM 32). This kind of witness demands a sincere commitment to on-going conversion to the Father, the source of true life, capable of delivering us from evil. Ultimately this will lead to an effective commitment to living the Gospel at an individual, family and social level.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation/Penance is at the center of the whole process of authentic conversion. “Experiencing the truth of the Sacrament of Reconciliation” (AM 33) is seen as an inseparable step towards the promotion of justice and peace. The Bishops are challenged to study and help the Christian faithful to understand the positive aspects of the traditional rites of reconciliation and their limitations so that they are helped to approach the Sacrament of Penance with greater depth and truth. Christians must come to an understanding that in the Sacrament of Penance, Jesus Christ is “the one Mediator” and in him God definitively reconciles us with himself and with one another.

Therefore, “Celebrated in faith, the Sacrament of Penance has power to reconcile us with God and with our neighbor” (AM 33). In this way, reconciliation then becomes a way of life and will promote a spirituality of communion that is aimed at building a society where justice and peace are experience by all (cf AM 34-35).

Africa’s Commitment looks further at the urgent need for “The inculturation of the Gospel and the evangelization of culture” (AM 36-38). The Church, and in the first place the bishops, must discern the positive values of individual cultures in order to identify the aspects which promote or hinder the incarnation of the values of the Gospel. The true protagonist of inculturation is the Holy Spirit which “enables the Gos-

pel to permeate all cultures, without becoming subservient to any” (AM 37).

The last part of this section underlines “The gift of Christ: the Eucharist and the Word of God” (AM 39-41). It is Jesus Christ Who nourishes the faithful with the Eucharist and the Word of God. In addition, “the Eucharist is the force which brings together the scattered children of God and maintains them in communion” (AM 41). The Eucharist is the true testimony to the world of a renewed humanity where Christ creates, in the grace of the Spirit, a new fraternity opposed to division, tribalism, racism and ethnocentrism.

2) “Living in harmony” (AM 42-68)

In this section, the Apostolic Exhortation focuses on building a life that is lived in harmony at all levels of the human society. Living in harmony implies creating favorable conditions for individuals and the community to uphold the fundamental dignity of every human person though promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace. The following are the topics which have been discussed in this section.

a. The Family (AM 42-46): Africa’s Commitment dedicates considerable space to look at the “The Family”, which is “the sanctuary of life and the living cell of society and the Church”(AM 42). It is the family where life is received and nurtured; members learn to love and to be loved; it is the place where they learn to know the face of God; it is the place of education; the place where the culture of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation is practiced, and it must be protected and defended against the many threats it faces (cf. 43). The Christian family is called to be a “domestic church”, a place where “all the members evangelize and are evangelized” (AM 46). It must set aside due space for prayer, celebrate Sundays and holy days, and read Holy Scripture every day.

It is within the family that the elderly enjoy particular veneration in Africa. “They are an enrichment for all elements of the family ... not only have they given life, but they contribute by their actions to build up their family” (AM 48). They are esteemed for their wisdom and experience, and play a positive role for all members of the family, especially for children and young

couples. Society has need of them because stability and social order in Africa are often entrusted to a council of elders or traditional leaders. The Church also has need of them, particularly to announce the Gospel. Africa can inspire Western societies in this field.

b. Equality between Men and Women (AM 51-59): The Apostolic Exhortation goes further to look at the equal and complementary role of “Men” (AM 51-54) and “Women” in the promotion of a harmonious life where reconciliation, justice and peace are lived fully. Both men and women have their own specific and yet inseparable role in the care of families, in their obligations in society and in participating in the mission of the Church. On one hand men, are called to “manifest and live on earth God's own fatherhood” (AM 53), while the African women also have a vital role to play in society and the Church (cf. AM 55).

In a personal appeal Pope Benedict XVI says, “we must recognize, affirm and defend the equal dignity of man and woman” (AM 57). For this reason, all acts of violence against women must be condemned. At the same time, the indispensable role of women in the life of the Church must be recognized and appreciated, “You, Catholic women, carry on the Gospel tradition of those women who assisted Jesus and his disciples” (cf. Lk 8:3; AM 58).

c. The Young People and Children (AM 60-68): Africa's Commitment recognizes that the “Young people” and “Children” represent the majority of Africa's population. This is a gift and a treasure from God which the Church is grateful to the Lord of life. Both young people and children “must be the object of concern on the part of their families, the Church, society and governments, for they are a source of hope and renewed life” (cf. AM 60, 65).

In the midst of all the challenges and vulnerability the youth are facing, society and the Church must help them to make good choices, guide them to pursue careers and assist them to pursue the vocations proper to them. Children, who are the most vulnerable in society, must be given special protection by families and society, especially against various intolerable and deplorable forms of treatment (AM 67, cf. 63).

3) “The African vision of life” (AM 69 – 87)

In this section Africa's Commitment acknowledges that the African holistic view of life can make valuable contribution to the appreciation of the dignity of human life and the need to respect the gift of God's creation. According to the African worldview, life is perceived as one that embraces the visible and the invisible world, “ancestors, the living and those yet to be born, the whole of creation and all beings” (AM 69). In this sense, true reconciliation, peace and justice is attainable only when there is respect for life in its holistic sense.

a. The Protection of Life (AM 70-78): The Apostolic Exhortation looks at the need to promote the “The protection of life” as the basis for talking about the African vision of life. Committed to promoting life and the integral development “of each man and the whole man”, the Church opposes abortion and, among other things, “acknowledges the courage of governments that have legislated against the culture of death” (AM 70). There are serious threats looming over human life in Africa such as the ravages of drugs, alcohol abuse and diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and poverty which have the potential to destroy the fabric of life (cf. AM 72-73). These problems do not only require a medical and pharmaceutical, but above all an ethical and pastoral response.

The other critical problem that is an obstacle to the promotion of life is that of ignorance and Illiteracy. These can be considered as scourge on the same level as the pandemics in so far they block access to knowledge (cf. AM 76). Through her network of Catholic schools of all levels, the Church must be able to contribute effectively to the fight of this scourge.

b. Respect for Creation and the Ecosystem (AM 79-80): Africa's Commitment recognizes and appreciates the abundant nature resources on the continent of Africa. “God has given Africa important natural resources” (AM 79). The political leaders and those involved in economic progress have the duty to initiate developmental projects and programs that would effectively utilize the resources in order to reduce the levels of poverty among the people and create wealth for all. Economic progress must, however, con-

tribute to the protection and preservation of the ecosystem.

c. The Good Governance of States (AM 81-83): The Apostolic Exhortation further looks at the need for the political leadership in Africa to promote good governance of their States in order to promote the common good of its citizens. This comes about through respect for Constitutions, free elections, independent judicial and penitential systems, and a transparent bureaucracy free from the temptation of corruption in the administration of public affairs. "The Church in Africa must help to build up society in cooperation with government authorities and public and private institutions that are engaged in building up the common good" (AM 81). While underlining "the need to make every effort to eliminate the death penalty", Africa's Commitment challenges the Church to organise its pastoral care of those whose fundamental rights are abused and to promote restorative justice (AM 83).

d. Migrants, Displaced Persons and Refugees (AM 84-87): The Apostolic Exhortation looks at the difficult situation affecting "Migrants, displaced persons and refugees". The migration of millions of people within Africa and beyond its borders is becoming a multidimensional problem which calls for responses, not only from the Church but from the entire international community. All forms of abuse, violence, intolerance, xenophobia or racism against migrants, displaced persons and refugees, who are fleeing their nations in search safety and a better life are condemned (cf. 84). The Church has to continue to make her voice heard and to campaign for the defence of all people.

e. Globalisation and international aid (AM 86-87): When looking at "Globalisation and International Aid", Africa's Commitment reminds the Church in Africa that globalisation can be a danger to humanity if it is not committed to promoting a person based and a community oriented world integration that is open to belief in God (cf AM 86). Globalisation must aim at promoting solidarity and respect for the common good of the individual person and of the society. While globalisation has created our world as a "village", international agents and non-governmental organisations must remain committed to the common good of all, to the re-

spect of human dignity and to the promotion of solidarity among peoples (AM 87).

4) "Dialogue and communion among believers" (AM 88 – 96)

In this section, Africa's Commitment emphasizes the centrality of dialogue and communion among believers as an inseparable element of the Church mission in the world. "This dialogue, this relationship, which God the Father initiated and established with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit, is a very real one, even though it is difficult to express in words" (Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, On the Church, August 6, 1964, par. 71). Here is the motivation for the Church in Africa to engage in dialogue with people at various levels of society, with Christian and non-Christian alike in order to promote reconciliation; justice and peace (cf. AM 88).

a. Ecumenical Dialogue and Challenges of New Religious Movements: (AM 89-91): The Apostolic Exhortation first looks at "Ecumenical dialogue and the challenge of new religious movements" as an importance aspect for the promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. The invitation of other Christian denominations to the Synodal Assembly comes as clear testimony of humility that Church's commitment to promotion of reconciliation in Africa can only be realised through communion of all the Disciples of Christ. "A divided Christianity remains a scandal, since it in fact contradicts the will of the Divine Master" (cf. Jn 17:21). Africa's Commitment makes an appeal to all the disciples of Christ to engage in collaboration and protection of the Christian faith in order to "find the spiritual strength that they need for building up the human family" (AM 89).

b. The promotion of Inter-Religious Dialogue (AM 92-95): *Africae Munus* considers inter-religious dialogue as part and parcel of the Church's work of evangelisation in Africa. In Africa, "the Church lives alongside the followers of African religions ... these religions are the cultural and spiritual soil from which most Christian converts spring and with which they continue to have daily contact" (AM 92). We must undertake serious discernment, accepting the elements of traditional cultures that conform to the teaching of Jesus Christ and identifying

points of divergence, such as magic and witchcraft, which have highly negative effects on families and society (cf. AM 93).

The problem of “dual affiliation” – to Christianity and to the African religions – remains a challenge. Thus, there is an urgent need to for a profound evangelisation of the African soul, in order to give the faithful the power of discernment in the face of the expansion of the so-called rising, syncretic movements and sects.

c. Dialogue with Islam (AM 94): Africa’s Commitment also acknowledges the importance of dialogue between Christians and Muslims despite the many challenges in pursuing this path. In considering relations with Islam and other non-Christian religions, there is need to focus on the recognition of religious freedom and the right to freedom of conscience in order to seek the road to peace and solidarity among followers of difference religions. “If all of us who believe in God desire to promote reconciliation, justice and peace, we must work together to banish every form of discrimination, intolerance and religious fundamentalism” (94).

In the midst of these diverse religious beliefs, traditions and practices, the Church has the mandate to remain faithful to her mission of evangelisation. “Christians who draw nourishment from the authentic source, Christ, are transformed by him into ‘the light of the world’ (Mt 5:14), and they transmit the one who is himself, ‘the Light of the world’ (Jn 8:12).

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*Mission is not an event,
it is not attained as a once and for
all achievement.
it is a continuous engagement with reality;
it is journeying, not simply arriving;
it is questioning, not providing
a simple answer;
it is searching, not finding a once and for
all solution.*

(From *Mission Today from an African
Perspective*, Anne Falola, OLA)

NEWS

Dear Members of SEDOS,

The Annual *SEDOS Residential Seminar* will be held from 2 to 6 May at Nemi, Rome.

The general theme will be: *Economy at the Service of Mission*, and at present we have the following Speakers and their themes. A more complete and correct version of the program will be available by the end of the month.

Mr. Andreas Machnik and Mr. Obiora Ike: *The Influence of Culture on Financial Management.* (Pax Bank, Director Foreign Clients Branch, Koln and Globe Ethics, Geneva)

Ms. Ursula Nothelle-Wildfeuer: *Ecological Exploitation and Sustainability in Relation to Finance.* (Professor of Christian Social Studies at Freiburg)

Mr. Luigino Bruni: *Economia e Comunione.* (Professor of Economic Studies at LUMSA, Rome)

Mr. Willi Kawohl: *Corruption Risks and Good Practices in a Sustained Fight Against Corruption in Ecclesiastical Structures.* (Transparency International Germany, Koln)

Mr. Raymond Verley: *Implications of the Transition from Religious Bursar to Finance Manager.*

(CND-CSA, Directeur Financier, Paris)

And two panels:

- **Religious Bursars from all over the world**
- **Refugees in Religious Houses**

For further **information** and **enrollement**, please contact the secretary, Ms. Leila Benassi: redacsed@sedosmission.org

Kind regards,

Father Peter Baekelmans, CICM
Executive Director SEDOS



Obituary



Many of you who remember **Fr William (Bill) Jenkinson, CSSp**, Executive Director of SEDOS from 1980 till 1992, will be saddened to learn that he passed away on 24 November 2016.

Fr. Willie was born in Lusk, Co. Dublin, on 25 June 1923. Among the various interesting positions he held was his appointment as the first Executive Secretary of the newly-founded Irish Missionary Union in 1970. He was able to initiate policies of liaison between the various missionary societies, men and women, laity and clerical, in the Irish Church. Later, in 2000, as Community Leader in Spiritan House, Dublin, he also ministered to refugees, asylum seekers and survivors of torture.

A close friend of his, Thérèse Osborne, let us know that he enjoyed corresponding with Philippa, our translator, and with other former colleagues of SEDOS. He appreciated our Christmas cards and valued our continued friendship. Willie spoke very highly of the happy times when he worked in Rome, at SEDOS.

May he rest in peace.



*"My mother gave me life,
You, how to live it"*



*"Love is the sugar
in the bitter coffee
of life"*



*"And you
are the best
thing that
ever
happened
to me"*



*"Distance means
nothing when someone
means everything"*

**These are messages of
love that we like
to address to Jesus at the
beginning of Lent.**