

STIMULI FOR VATICAN COUNCIL II: RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The study is an attempt to investigate the internal and external factors which prompted the Roman Catholic Church to convoke the Second Vatican Council. It examines the historical context in which the event impacted on Christianity in Africa vis-a vis the inculturation of the gospel, the ecumenical movement, and evangelization. The study which employs the tools of historical and phenomenological research reveals that the Second Vatican Council opened up vistas for the evolution a truly African Roman Catholicism. One is not however unmindful of the challenges posed by the opportunity: there is the danger of a return to traditional religious beliefs and practices and of profaning catholic doctrine and usages under the guise of inculturation and ecumenism. In view of this, this paper concludes that the leaders of the church have a duty of synthesizing the provisions of Vatican II and the practice of inculturation, ecumenism and ecclesiology in Africa.

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Introduction

In the history of twentieth century Christianity, the Second Vatican Council commonly called Vatican II stands out as a landmark that has radically affected the Roman Catholic Church in all its ramifications. The historic event in St Peter's Basilica engaged 2,400 bishops from across the world and lasted for four autumnal sessions, 1962-1965. Hogg, observed that the context for understanding Vatican II includes the post-Christendom age, the ecumenical movement, worldwide pluralism, the epochal decline in the west global hegemony, and the rapid powerful emergence on the universal stage of Asia, the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America which, he said, holds 78 percent of the world's people with 82 percent projected for AD 2000.¹ In Vatican II, one sees-after a century of "besieged fortress" mentality – that the *aggiornamento* (reform or updating) of John XXIII proceeded in two basic but interrelated directions. Internally for the church, the council urged renewal, worship, reform and ecumenism. Externally for the new encounter in global engagement, the council promoted dialogue with, mission to and service for the world. This study is an attempt to investigate the internal and external factors, which necessitated the convocation of arguably the greatest council in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and its impact on Christianity in Africa. We begin with the internal factors which include: the background of Pope John XXIII who initiated the council, the interest of some Catholics in the ecumenical happenings around them, the need to reposition the church for the challenges of the modern world and to update some aspects of the church's teachings and policies. The following constituted the external stimuli — the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, the indispensability/allure of the rich liturgical Rites of the Eastern churches, the Olive branch held out by the Eastern Church and the tide of globalization. We begin with the internal factors.

Brief Account of the History of Pope John XXIII and Catholic Interest in Ecumenical Movements

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli was born at Sotto il Monte (Bergamo), Italy on November 25, 1881, the third child and eldest son in the family of thirteen born to Giovanni Battista and Marianna Guilia Roncalli. The boy's forebears for several generations had been tenant farmers on an estate, and even when he reigned in the Vatican, his

¹Richey Hogg, "Vatican II's *Ad Gentes*: A Twenty Year Retrospective" in *International Bulletin: Mission Since Vatican II*, 9, 4 (1985) 146.

brothers were still engaged in eking, a plain livelihood out of the hard and unfriendly Bergamo soil.

Following his elementary education, at the age of 12 Angelo entered the Diocesan Seminary in Bergamo. He was ordained on August 10, 1904 and shortly thereafter, became secretary to Giacomo Maria Radini Tedeschi, the bishop of Bergamo, an extremely vigorous, far seeing prelate deeply concerned about social reforms. In 1921, he was made director of the Italian Society for the propagation of the faith. This was a delicate assignment since it involved not only modernizing the society but also detaching responsibility from numerous regional directors and centralizing administration in Rome. He remained in this post of four years until Pius XI appointed him apostolic visitor to Bulgaria, 1925-1934 and to Turkey and Greece, 1934-1944.² In Turkey, he established friendly relations with the orthodox and visited the ecumenical Patriarch in 1939. In Greece, he had the support to arrange relief supplies during the Second World War.

Roncalli's diplomatic career, which lasted for almost thirty years, took him to many countries across the world. For Roncalli, his diplomatic career made him catholic in character and perception, ready to appreciate whatever was good in every culture. On January 12, 1953, Pius XII elevated Roncalli to the sacred college of cardinals. Pius XII died on October 9, 1958, and on October 25, Roncalli entered the conclave which was to choose a successor. He was himself elected three days later and took the name John XXIII, the first Pope to bear this name since 1334.

John XXIII was 76 years old when he came to the Papal throne. From the very outset, John endeared himself to the whole world by his warmth, humour and easy approachability. He had an impatience with empty traditionalism and often astonished his aids by the forthright way in which he cut through meaningless formalities.³ John was sociable and modern in thought and action. In his first Christmas message, he addressed "his brothers in the east" (1958) which was answered by Patriarch Athenagoras and followed by an exchange of presents and the sending of representatives in 1961 and 1962.⁴ His decision to reform the church was therefore, in part, an

²Lawrence Shehan, *The McGraw – Hill Encyclopedia of World Biography*, New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1973, 10.

³Lawrence Shehan, *The McGraw – Hill Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 11.

⁴J.F. Lescauwae, *Ecumenism: The Partners in the Ecumenical Dialogue of Today*, Belgium: American College Note Service, 1980/81, 41 .

expression of an intrinsic inner disposition as well as a response to the irrepressible interest of Catholic faithful in the ecumenical happenings around them.

Interest of Some Catholics in the Ecumenical Movement

The blossoming of the ecumenical movement among non-Catholic which took root in Edinburgh 1910 stimulated Catholic theologians to think the problems of church disunity and intensify contact with “separated brethren”. The psychological landscape preceding the resumption of talks on ecumenism and reconciliation was given a fertile disposition “by the renewal of Catholic theologians at the beginning of the 20th century particularly historical and critical research in biblical exegesis, liturgy and church history.” This provided a new and critical approach for the resumption of dialogue from within. While by-passing superficial differences, more fundamental agreements were discovered, fresh understanding amongst them appeared and this was decisive.⁵

Apart from the new interest in theological and ecumenical studies and the concomitant flourishing of literature on the subject matter, there were signs that Catholic parishioners were implicitly interested and or involved in the unfolding history. Goodall observed that:

In the realm of personal devotion and the nurture of the life of prayers, there has always been some transcending of the deepest historic differences. Hymns and prayers have largely ignored ecclesiology and there has seldom been lacking in any of the churches those who longed to see an end of disunity and those whose prayers and friendship were devoted to this end.⁶

Again, he said, “in the concern for a Christian understanding of the nature of society and of the principles which should govern international relationships, there has been some crossing of the ecclesiastical frontiers.”⁷

In spite of this development, the Roman Catholic Church remained opposed to any form of ecumenical contact between its members and Christians of other hue. For example, the first statement in this regard appeared in 1948 as a *monitum* or warning to remind the Catholic bishops all over the world that canon law excludes any form of

⁵Bernard Ngwoke, “Ecumenism in a Divided World,” *Bigard Theological Studies*, 7, 2 (1987) 44.

⁶Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress: A Decade of Change in the Ecumenical Movement: 1961-71*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, 7.

⁷Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress*, 7.

communicatio in *Sacris* and that theologians who will participate in ecumenical conferences have to ask permission from the Holy see.⁸

Obviously mindful of the irrepressible interest of its members in the ecumenical movement, the Catholic Church capitulated to ecumenical reforms. The following year, 1949, the church issued a second document, "Instruction Concerning the Ecumenical Movement." In this statement, the activity of the Holy spirit concerning the ecumenical movement was prudently acknowledged just as the fact of the increasing interest among the Catholics. The bishops were invited to foster this interest and to guide in a prudent way, to appoint expert priests for this task and to give the necessary permission to theologians who would take part in ecumenical meetings. Arising from this, several bishops started to work in consonance with the instruction and many commentaries fixed the attention to these new created opportunities. These developments, in the view of Goodall, contributed to the favourable climate in which Pope John XXIII took his momentous step to convoke the second Vatican council.⁹

The Need to Reposition the Church for the Challenges of the Modern World

The twentieth century was fundamentally an age of science and technology. Feats hitherto imaginable only in fiction movies have become reality to the astonishment of critics and cynics alike. In no other age has mankind enjoyed such abundance of wealth, resources and economic well-being; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the worlds is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate. At no time have men had such a keen sense of freedom, only to be faced by new forms of slavery in living and thinking. Characteristic of our age are: political, social, economic hostilities, racial and ideological antagonism and the ever-heightening fear of self-destruction. Ours is a world where there is a painstaking search for a better material world, without a parallel spiritual advancement.

There has been remarkable changes in the traditional structure of local communities – family, tribe, village, various groups and social relationship are subjected to ever more sweeping changes.

⁸Lescrauwaet, J.F. *History of the Ecumenical Movement: The Two Main Partners in the Modern Ecumenical Movement: The World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church*, Belgium, American College Note Service, 1983/84, 71.

⁹Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress*, 7.

Urbanisation and industrialization are in the increase with changes in attitude and structures frequently calling accepted values into question. This is true above all of young people who have grown impatient and at times rebellious.

As regards religion, there is a completely new atmosphere that conditions the practice. On the one hand people are taking a hard look at all magical worldviews and prevailing superstitions and demanding a more personal and active commitment to faith.¹⁰ When reading about science, it is not unusual to come across startling religious expressions. For example scientists have been referred to as the “high priest of a new technological culture” and the laboratories as “temples” or “shrine”. Wherefore have these happened? *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* identifies, “the discovery of scientific explanation for phenomenon formally attributed to supernatural causes” and “the elimination of the influence of organised religion from spheres of activities such as medicine, education and arts.”¹¹ Developments like this have led to the growth of secularism; “a view of life... based on the premise that religion and religious considerations should be ignored or purposely excluded.”¹²

By the 19th century, men were no longer comfortable consigning God and religion to the background; even his existence was questioned. Philosophers and scientists had no qualms about boldly proclaiming their view. “Our enemy is God,” declared atheists like Jean Paul Satre and Fredrich Neitsche. “Hatred of God is the beginning of wisdom. If mankind would make true progress, it must be on the basis of Atheism.”¹³ Some clergy had also denied God by turning their back on his moral standards. The result was widespread distrust and apathy for religion and the church. Consequently, in Europe, for instance, church attendance was in free fall. Less than 10 percent catholic attended mass every Sunday, while only 3-4 percent of Parisian Catholics regularly attended church. Similar or even worse lower attendance had been observed in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Scandinavian Countries.¹⁴

Of serious concern to religious authorities was the dearth of candidates for the priesthood. In less than a century, the number of

¹⁰Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II, Vol. 1, The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1998, 906.

¹¹*The Watchtower*, December 1 (1991:4).

¹²*The Watchtower*, December 1 (1991:4).

¹³*The watchtower*, December 1 (1994:5).

¹⁴*The Watchtower*, December 1 (1994:5).

priests in France had fallen drastically from 14 priests per 10,000 inhabitants to less than 1 per 10,000. At the same time, the number of children enrolled in catechism classes was dwindling, giving rise to serious doubts about the ability of the Catholic church to ensure its renewal.¹⁵

The Need to Update Some Aspects of the Church's Teachings/Policies

Pope John XXIII on ascension of office was saddled with the formidable challenge of general apathy for religion and the church occasioned in part by the mind boggling feat of science and technology, some of which threatened the very foundation on which not only the church but religion in general is built. The enormity of these challenges demanded the convocation of a council that would engage the entire church in an objective and holistic introspection aimed at putting its house in order through the appraisal of its teachings and policies.

Christianity, so it has been affirmed, is a revelation given once and for all and yet ever renewing itself. As it were, the history of its beliefs is the record of the fruitful tension between the original deposits of the faith and its continual elucidation in each succeeding age. In this development, canonical scriptures, ecclesiastical tradition and the use of right reason are all involved. From the earlier days of the church, factors were at work to distinguish the fundamentals of belief, essential and common to all who profess themselves Christian from those more speculative items concerning which certain differences of opinion was not only legitimate but to be expected.

These formulations came to be expressed in succinct formulae known as creed, a necessary corollary of which is the manner of worship and ecclesial order. We must note that some of these emanated in a climate of polemics and so were sometimes rash and to the extreme. For instance, efforts to reconcile the church communities that broke off after the reformation date back to the thirties and forties of the sixteenth centuries. The fact that the contending fronts had not yet been fossilized in their positions made negotiations less tasking but that opportunities were not utilised because according to Ngwoke, "Rome had for a long time continued to look at the attempt at re-unification with breakaways only in terms of their "return to the fathers house"; an absorption of some sort. This negative attitude on the part of Rome later came to crystallize in one famous axiom –

¹⁵*The Watchtower*, April, 1 (2003:4).

“Extra ecclesiam nulla Salus” outside the church, there is no salvation. The foundation of this doctrine was laid by such men as Origen, Cyprian, Fulgentius, Boniface V and their protégé. The council of Florence in 1442 also made the same declaration in its “December Pro Jacobillis.”¹⁶

Another controversial teaching of the Catholic Church concerns the status of the Jewish race which was presented by the church as a people who not only rejected the Messiah (Jesus) sent to them but who also conspired and had him killed. Consequently, they were adjudged rejected by God or accursed.¹⁷ This attitude towards the Jews was not merely informal but official. The church liturgy for example once contained clichés which re-enacted this historical fact with a view to condemning the race to eternal guilt. However, with the emergence of the nation of Israel in 1948 as a sovereign state, there was the inevitable need for a rethink. Besides, many argued that no matter the sin the Jews may have committed, the holocaust was enough punishment for them. Still others stressed prophet Ezekiel’s reservations for and reversal of the biblical saying, “the father eat sour grapes and the children teeth are set on edge?” (Ez 18:2). It is true that the Jews of the period in question were not directly responsible for the death of Jesus. Moreover, the interest of the Roman Catholic in the Jewish people was not due simply to the then *de facto* condition of religious pluralism. The church’s concern was based on its search into its own mystery, “it remembers the spiritual bonds which ties the people of the new covenant to the offspring of Abraham.”¹⁸

Catholic teaching before Vatican II lay the guilt of the reformation on the secessionist who were branded rebels, breakaways, prodigal sons, heretics, dissenters, schismatic to mention but a few. The church came to realize that this attitude was simply counterproductive. It only exacerbated rather than mitigate the crisis and that sacrifice was required from both sides if genuine unity must be achieved. The Catholic Church was required to take the initiative and send the right signal.

Before Vatican II, the catholic hierarchy was largely clergy based. The need for greater empowerment of the lay faithful arose partly

¹⁶Bernard Ngwoke, “Ecumenism in a Divided World,” 42.

¹⁷Thomas Stransky, “The Church and Other Religions,” *International Bulletin: Mission Since Vatican II* 9, 4 (1985) 157.

¹⁸Thomas Stransky, “The Church and Other Religions,” 157.

from the increase in population without communicate increase in the number of clergy, the progress in science and technology, the shrinking of the gaps that have kept men apart and the entrenchment of communism in some countries with the concomitant muzzling of priests and religious freedoms. In such a situation, it was hard to see how the church could make its presence and action felt without the help of the laity. The council was therefore to broaden and at the same time streamline the nature of the lay apostolate, its character, and the variety of its forms: it was to give the fundamental principles and pastoral directives for its more effective exercise.¹⁹ The aforementioned could be termed internal stimuli for Vatican Council II. The external factors were not less significant.

To the general public, the World Council of Churches is best known through its service to human need. The relief of the homeless, the care and resettlement of refugees, the swift response to the havoc wrought by flood, earthquake, and famine speak a language immediately understood and appreciated even by those who find the blessed word “ecumenical” uncongenial or incomprehensible. It is significant that during the ten years prior to the formal launching of the WCC at Amsterdam in 1948, the most notable features of the councils “process of formation” were its practical service to prisoners of war and displaced persons and its concentration on the impending task of post war reconstruction. Even during wartime, tens of thousands of pounds were raised and expert workers recruited both for immediate relief work and for long time service.²⁰

A number of national organisations, working closely with those responsible for shaping the new WC, entered into the field of relief and reconstruction on a large scale. In the U.S., Church World Service was established in 1946 and soon embarked on a great programme of aid towards the resettlement of European refugees and in the help of the devastated churches of Europe, Asia and other parts of the world. In Britain, the churches joined together to form an organization called Christian Reconstruction of Europe. In Germany, similar organisations were born for similar tasks.

On the birth of WCC in 1948, an organization known as the Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service was included in its structure. Through this agency, hundreds of thousands of refugees have been resettled; great relief operations

¹⁹Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II, Vol. 1*, 766-767.

²⁰Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress*, 43.

have been conducted in times of flood, famine, and earthquake.²¹ Christian awareness of the most desperate needs and the desire to respond to them transcend denominational and congressional boundaries. The fact that the Catholic Church permitted some of its organs like the Catholic Caritas International to co-operate with the WCC at a time when all forms of relationship with other churches was prohibited enunciates the avid interest of the Catholic Church in the operations of the WCC especially the Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service.

Vatican Council II was therefore necessary to identify with and give official support and guidelines for the noble cause, which was considered incumbent on every man of good will. Vatican II widened the scope of collaboration and cooperation between agencies of the Catholic Church and those of the WCC. With Vatican II the church became a full member of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order. It equally became permanently involved with Church Medical Commission, and several WCC's programmes on issues of evangelization, education, development, relief work and peace movement.²² Working closely with the WCC to which many Eastern churches belong, awakened the consciousness of the Catholic Church to the rich liturgical rites of the Eastern churches. The church desired to recapture cherished traditions which though it had lost but were alive and well in the separated churches of the east. How did this schism occur?

The reciprocal excommunication between the Roman Catholic Church otherwise called the Latin Church and the Eastern Church in 1054 AD was the climax of centuries of somewhat imperceptible separation.

The doctrinal and disciplinary differences are seen as insufficient to explain the schism. The theological meaning of the Eucharistic epiclesis and of the "Filioque", the doctrine concerning purgatory and the laws concerning priestly celibacy, fasting, unleavened bread and series of ecclesiastical habits could only divide both churches after centuries of growing estrangement on the whole social, political and cultural level. The surprising aspect of it, as pointed out in this study, is that the schism occurred almost unnoticed by the average Christian and given its form, many trivialized the matter and hoped for a quick re-union. Unfortunately, the crusade introduced a new

²¹Norman Goodall, *Ecumenical Progress*, 44.

²²Lescauwae, J.F. *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, 7.

dimension to the crisis. After the first crusade, (1098-1099), both at Antioch and Jerusalem, Latin Patriarchs were set up. As a result, two rival bishops claimed the same see and two hostile congregations existed in the same city. A Latin empire was founded named “Romania” and it existed from 1204 till 1261. The Latin patriarchate had 22 archdioceses and 58 dioceses in the midst of Eastern Churches.²³

Attempts at re-union between the 12th and 14th centuries were stalled by Rome which saw re-union only in terms of unconditional surrender of the East to the West. By the 15th century, perhaps the most important council that attempted to bridge the gap was opened in Florence (1438-39). For the first time in the history of Christendom, the Greeks and Latin sat down as parties on equal footing. But with the invasion of the East by the Turks in 1483, whatever that could be termed benefit from reconciliatory council was reversed.²⁴

However, Rome would not give up on the eastern churches because of the richness of their liturgy and spiritual traditions. The love with which the eastern Christians celebrated the sacred liturgy is common knowledge. In this celebration, the faithful united with their Bishops, have access to God, the father through the son, “the word made flesh who suffered and was glorified in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And so, made sharers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), they enter into communion with the most holy tribute, in beautiful hymns of praise to Mary whom the ecumenical synod of Ephesus solemnly proclaimed to be the Holy Mother of God in order that Christ might be truly and property acknowledged as Son of God and Son of Man according to the scriptures. They also give homage to saints among them the fathers of the universal church.²⁵

In the east are to be found the riches of these spiritual traditions which are given expression especially in monastic life. From the glorious times of the holy Fathers, that monastic spirituality flourished in the East, it later flowed over into the Western World and there provided a source from which Latin monastic life took its roots and has often drawn fresh vigour ever since. To sustain this flow, successive Popes took steps towards re-union. From the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to the time of Pius XI the hope of re-union at the Catholic side, as usual, was concentrated on the increasing

²³Lescrauwaet, J.F. *History of the Ecumenical Movement*, 22.

²⁴Bernard Ngwoke, “Ecumenism in a Divided World,” 41.

²⁵J.F. Lescrauwaet, *Ecumenism*, 18-19.

number of the Eastern churches “returning” to the See of Peter. In this perspective, the Papacy was inclined to safeguard the several Eastern rites at least in the liturgical sense of that word, but the missionary, as a matter of fact, was fostering “Latinization.”²⁶ Pope Pius XI and several others after him founded colleges for oriental Catholic Students and issued encyclicals recognizing specific Eastern traditions and the privileges of the patriarchs. Pius XII dedicated three encyclical to the relation with the eastern churches: *Orientalis Ecclesiae* in 1944, *Orientalis Omnes* in 1945, and *Orientalis Ecclesians* in 1952.

The developing Papal attitude of spirit had become reassuring to other faithful, Vatican II was therefore, the climax or culmination of centuries old yearning, an opportunity for greater concessions to the Eastern churches as evidenced in the document *Unitatis redintegratio*, part of which reads:

In the study of revealed truth, East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and confessing divine things. These various theological formulations are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting. With regard to the authentic theological traditions of the Orientals... they are admirably rooted in Holy Scriptures, are fostered and given expression in liturgical life, one nourished by the living tradition of the apostles and by the works of the fathers and spiritual writers of the East, they are directed towards a right ordering of life, indeed towards a full contemplation of Christian truth.²⁷

The lifting of the mutual anathema between the East and the West was a practical demonstration of the Catholic Church’s commitment to re-union with the Eastern brethren which had earlier held out the olive branch. In 1902 for instance, the ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III invited by an encyclical letter all separated Orthodox churches to express their opinion on relations with other Christian bodies. In 1920, from Constantinople came an encyclical letter, “Unto all the Churches of Christ wheresoever they be.” We quote in *extenso* the text of this famous letter as cited by Lescauwaet:

Our church is of the opinion that a closer intercourse with each other and a mutual understanding between the several Christian churches is not prevented by the doctrinal differences existing between them, and that such an understanding is highly desirable and necessary, and in many ways useful in the well conceived interest of each one of the churches taken part and as a whole Christian body as also for preparing and

²⁶J.F. Lescauwaet, *Ecumenism*, 38.

²⁷J.F. Lescauwaet, *Ecumenism*, 19.

facilitating the complete and blessed union which may someday be attained with God's help.

Our Church therefore deems the present time most opportune for bringing forth and considering this important question in common. For although owing to old prejudices, traditions, and even pretensions, it is probable that there may even now arise or be brought forward the same difficulties which have so often frustrated the work of union, nevertheless, seeing that it is now a question of mere contact and understanding, the difficulties, in our mind, will in any case be less serious, and if there be a good will and disposition, neither can these nor should they constitute an invincible and insuperable obstacle ... And first of all, we deem as necessary and indispensable the removal of all mutual distrust and friction between the various churches caused by the tendency, to be seen among some of them, to entice and convert followers of other confessions.²⁸

The letter called for "closer intercourse and ... understanding" as a step on the road to eventual unity and went so far as to suggest exchanges of students and relationships between theological colleges. Among other suggestions were:

- a. The acceptance of a uniform Calendar for the simultaneous celebration of all the great Christian feasts by all the churches.
- b. The mutual support of the churches in the work of strengthening religious relief of charity and the like.
- c. The settlement of the question of mixed marriages between the various confessions.
- d. The impartial and more historical examination of doctrinal differences, both from the chair and in theological treatises.
- e. A more friendly intercourse between representatives of the various churches wherever they be.

Though not all the Orthodox Churches adhered with the same intensity to the principles of this document, it was obvious that the Eastern Church wanted an end to hostilities. In 1958, during the final illness of Pius XII, letters of sympathy came in from the Ecumenical Patriarch Athanagoras of Constantinople, followed after the Pope Pius' death by a message of condolence, and by greetings for the newly elected Pope John XXIII.²⁹ Indeed, the right hand of fellowship extended by the Eastern Church to the Roman Catholic Church and indeed to all the Churches which identify with the name of Jesus

²⁸J.F. Lescrauwaet, *Ecumenism*, 27-28.

²⁹J.F. Lescrauwaet, *Ecumenism*, 41.

Christ needed to be appreciated and reciprocated at least in the spirit of globalization, which was sweeping across the world amongst other reasons. A pertinent question is what is globalization? In its present popular conception and usage, globalization is being associated with the emergence of the “global village” – the emergence of a one world which is brought about by the new communication revolution.³⁰ It is a wide phenomenon embracing every facet of human relationships – cultural, social, political and economic concerns. How and when it started remains contentious among scholars. R.I. Ohikhokhai traces the origin of globalization to the contact between the Mediterranean peoples with parts of Africa which he said probably took place in 600 BC when Pharaoh Nero II of Egypt commissioned an expedition of Phoenician sailors which sailed around the continent of Africa. This according to him, was later followed with the expeditionary efforts of Portuguese and Spaniards that opened up contacts between hitherto unknown parts of the world and Europe.³¹

Many find the “kick starter” for cultural globalization in the vivid command of Jesus Christ: “... therefore, go and make disciples of all nations ...” (Mt 28:19). In obedience to this command, Christians are seen to have employed every means to spread the gospel the world over. The Roman Catholic push to globalize its faith especially during the medieval times was evidenced in its sponsorship of missionary societies and the effort to curb separatist groups within its members. Nabudere posits that the Christian crusades and voyages were aimed at creating a universal religion. Its impetus was the “Papal Bulls” which granted charters to the Portuguese and Spanish Christian Merchants to spread Christianity throughout the world. The 16th century cultural globalization quest of the Catholic Church suffered some setback with the torrent of the Reformation which tore the once monolithic Latin Church to shreds. Several protectionist policies were initiated in a bid to safeguard whatever was left of the church. Advertently or inadvertently, the Church had put itself behind the “iron curtain” as it were.

True to the scientific axiom: “everything in the universe is in a state of flux and man and society are part of this flux.” Not less affected is religious thought. The Catholic Church was losing its grip and

³⁰D.W. Nabudere, “Globalization, The African Post-Colonial State, Post-Traditionalism and the New World Order,” in D.W. Nabudere, ed., *Globalization and the Post-Colonial African State*, Zimbabwe: AAPS Books, 2000, 1.

³¹Rudy Ohikhokhai, “Globalization and Third World Development: A Historical Analysis,” Typescript, Benin City: University of Benin, 2005, 1.

influence in Europe which used to be its stronghold. Civilization had rendered obsolete some means of evangelization and at the same time opening new vistas. From the first and second world war, it became increasingly clear that the foundation for world peace, security, and development in any field of human endeavour, be it religious, economic or political is dialogue, negotiation, tolerance, compromise, accommodation and openness. To do otherwise, was to swim against the current of contemporary thought and reality. Vatican Council II was an opportune time for the Catholic Church, which is a human institution of some sort to respond to the global dialectics of the time even in its obedience to the great command.

The Second Vatican Council and African Christianity

Vatican council II has been of momentous import for Christianity in Africa. In the first place, even though the council failed to classify African religion among the world religions, the attitude of openness, humility and tolerance adopted by the council disposed it to recognize and embrace whatever was good and capable to enrich the gospel content in every religion and culture. Pope John Paul II espoused this trail blazing thesis when he said, “Africa constitutes a real treasure house of so many authentic human values. It is called upon to share these values with other peoples and nations and so to enrich the whole human family and other cultures.”³²

This motivation, which is rooted in *Ad Gentes*, the council’s document on inculturation provides the leeway and impetus which the Catholic Church in Africa needed to inject African spirituality into the understanding and practice of the Christian religion. Hitherto, the expansion of the gospel as preached by the Roman Catholic Church, was stalled by the erroneous views in some quarters which saw Christianity as a foreign and white man’s religion. With authority derived from Vatican II, inculturation is being done in Africa through the introduction of the message to the people using their popular media of expression which include: language, music, signs and symbols used in traditional worship, and African general life style. Msgr Usenbor (2002) affirms that,

The laity now dance to the altar to present their offering, sometimes drama episodes are employed in the church to drive home some points and teach moral lessons, church services are conducted in local languages

³²As cited in Jude Ukaga, “Inculturation in the Igbo Church in the Light of Vatican II’s *Ad Gentes*,” Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, 1983, 41.

in some stations in order to make the gospel more at home with the people and enhance greater participation. There is greater emphasis on fasting and prayer and some festivals are approved for church members. Infants could now be baptized with local names in so far as such names do not have reference to idolatry.³³

In several Igbo communities of eastern Nigeria for instance, two socio-cultural values associated with yam production have been accorded tacit recognition. These are the New Yam festival and yam title-taking. Before Vatican II, it was the privilege of non-Christians, but today, it is the affair of all Igbo. These and several other house cleaning measures made possible by the reforms of Vatican II, Usenbor contends, have made the church more at home with the people and doused accusations of extreme formalism and westernism. To underscore the seriousness the Catholic Church in Africa attaches to the issue of inculturation, inculturation committees have been established at various levels of the church hierarchy with the mandate to use appropriate cultural values of a people to evangelize them. The impact of Vatican II cannot be fully appreciated until mention is made of the theological awakening which it engendered, the main thrust of which was that dogmatic theology was no longer been looked upon as mere explanation of dogma but as the actualization of the meaning of divine revelation in relation to man's present needs.³⁴ This somewhat situational theology was copiously employed during the struggle for South Africa's independence.

The enhanced powers of the lay faithful, contained in the council's document on the liturgy and the laity has facilitated the propagation of the Catholic faith. Influenced by the activities of Pentecostal Christians around him, the catholic faithful has come to realize the priest in him as a believer. A manifestation of this is the flowering of Charismatic movement in Africa. In many Catholic parishes, the charismatic movement has become a virile instrument of evangelization as well as the spiritual arm of the church. With its claim to provide answers to the spiritual and mundane concerns through fasting and prayers, the movement has in some places been able to forestall the defection of Catholic faithful to indigenous and Pentecostal churches.

³³*The voice* 35 (1996/97:6).

³⁴Justine Ukpong, "African Theology: Some Major Contributory Factors," in G.L. Lasebikan et al. ed., *Christian Presence and West African Response through the Years, Proceedings of the August 1982 Nigerian Zonal Conference and the August 1983, West African Conference of WAATI*, 8.

Perhaps, the greatest relevance of Vatican II for Christianity in Africa is its stimulus to the ecumenical movement. Described as, the initiative and activities encouraged and organized, according to the various needs of the church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity. Historically, the ecumenical movement is the totality of all activities among the Christians towards the recovery of the unity of all believers in Christ, transcending differences of creed, ways of worship, and ecclesial order.³⁵ It is a fact of history that the various European and American missionaries that evangelized Africa carried out their tasks in the cacophony of their divided voices. Consequently, the gospel instead of being a harbinger of peace turned out to be an instrument of division and acrimony. This situation compounded by the catholic exclusive policy constituted a drag on the course of unity and evangelization in Africa. But with the council document (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) providing authority as well as a road map for the interaction of the Catholic Church with other churches, ecumenism has been brought closer to its goals. As a result of cooperation among churches, there has been mutual borrowing of whatever is good among Christian denominations. For example, Rev(Fr) Ogbomwan associates what he calls positive changes in the music content of Catholic worship and the desire to study the word of God, that is, the Bible among Catholics to the influence of Pentecostalism. He recalls also that he was invited by the Anglican Bishop of Benin to give a talk during a programme organized by the church, an act Ogbomwan admits, would not have been possible before Vatican II.³⁶

With co-operation among different Christian denominations, Christianity has acquired varied degrees of political influence in African countries. By speaking with one voice, Christians have been able to compel government to rescind certain policies that were perceived to be inimical to the survival and evangelization of the gospel. For instance, the inability of some Muslims in Nigeria to introduce Sharia at the federal level is traceable to the resistance of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), an umbrella organization embracing all Christian churches in Nigeria. Vatican II has stimulated evangelization efforts in Africa. It has also thrown up challenges. For example, some parishes stand the risk of exceeding approved limits

³⁵J.F. Lescrauwaet, *Ecumenism*, 12.

³⁶Festus Ogbomwan, Personal Interview, Parish Priest, Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Benin City, Member Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Executive Council, Edo State, 24/2/2005 C. 50 Years.

in the process of inculturating the gospel message. Openness continues to create room for the infiltration of harmful doctrines and practices into the church. Increased powers of the laity have generated conflict between the laity and the clergy in some places.

Conclusion

Pope John XXIII, in response to developments within and outside the Roman Catholic Church convoked the second council of the Vatican. Attendance was broad as virtually every continent of the world was represented. In addition, other Christian denominations and ecumenical organizations were invited to observe its proceedings. The entire gamut of the church life was affected by the reforms that were undertaken at the council. Even non-Catholic organizations were affected on many fronts. For the Catholic Church, new vistas are opened for evangelization and development and for the evolution of a truly African Catholicism. Within these opportunities lie the challenges which the church in Africa, the Roman Catholic in particular must grapple with.