

THE IMPACT OF VATICAN II ON THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

The African Synods in Comparative Perspective

Tim Carey[♦]
Boston College

The African Synods – the first in 1994 and the second in 2009 – aimed to highlight some of the basic issues facing the mission and nature of the Catholic Church in Africa. While the former synod characterized the ministry of the African church through the model of family in God, the latest synod was charged with developing a model which promoted the themes of reconciliation, peace, and justice in light of regional conflicts arising within many sub-Saharan African countries. Bringing together bishops and church leaders from throughout the continent, the synods were motivated by the need for an articulation of the presence and activity of the Catholic Church in Africa in the period of post-colonial independence especially after the 1994 Rwandan genocide and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995.

Signifying the mandate of Vatican II with its emphasis on the local church, those in attendance at both synods sought to reconcile the traditional African religious identity with the more foundational teachings of the Catholic Church. Underscoring both synods is the idea of the church as both local and global family. Regarding the

[♦]**Mr Tim Carey** is a PhD candidate in Comparative Theology at Boston College where he studies Muslim-Christian relations in sub-Saharan Africa. His dissertation considers how the inter-religious Muslim and Christian response to HIV/AIDS in East Africa can be seen as a model for a practical interreligious engagement. Carey has additionally served as the Director of the annual Engaging Particularities Conference at Boston College which brings young scholars in the field of Comparative Theology together to present their work. Email: timothy.j.carey@gmail.com

socio-economic challenges of post-colonial Africa, Jesuit theologian Rev. Fr Agbonkhianmegehe E. Orobator aptly states, “[o]n a continent synonymous with deep crises, contradictions and strife, ‘Church as Family’ represents an opportunity for attaining the reconciliation, justice, and peace of God’s reign that hitherto have seemed to elude Africa.”¹

To be sure, church as family has long been a major theme for the African Catholic population with its roots in two documents produced during the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. Vatican II might then be best understood as a major motivating factor for the synods since it illuminated the dual nature of the local and global church in Africa. From this, we have an engagement with African traditional belief in particular with the first synod and a discussion of peace, justice, and reconciliation in general with the second; where the first synod sought to develop a model for the church that harmonized traditional African religious practice with mainstream Catholic worship in a process called enculturation, the second African Synod raised the question of justice within modern African society. By considering the influence of Vatican II on the African Synods, this paper will reflect on the lasting identity of the church in Africa especially as this pertains to the confluence of traditional belief systems and foundational Catholic teaching.

1. Documents of Vatican II: *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*

While the nature and mission of the church has evolved to meet the needs of its local population, certain theological ideas have had a significant impact on the identity of Catholicism throughout Africa. Vatican II itself represents a major event in the life of the Catholic Church in Africa with its call for a church that reflects the ethnic identity of its local congregation. Highlighting the influence of Vatican II, the African Catholic Church in this post-colonial period sought to enunciate its relationship not only among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa but also on a global scale outside of the continent. In particular, two documents produced by Vatican II reflect the major concerns confronting the church in Africa in this period after colonialism: *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

¹A.E. Orobator, “The Synod as Ecclesial Conversation,” in ed., A.E. Orobator *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011, 1.

The first document, *Lumen Gentium* or the 'Dogmatic Constitution of the Church' draws on the image of the church as a church of the people, one which resembles the very population it serves. "Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race," the document reads, the church "desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission" (LG, 1). Speaking with critical self-reflexivity, the document advances its mandate while also promoting the dual identity of the church. In framing the document this way, the church recognizes the need to acknowledge its own internal self-awareness while also promoting its universal mission of attaining fuller unity in Christ. This then allows church leaders to engage the spiritual and practical aspects of Christianity, simultaneously exploring the relationship between both the heavenly and earthly dimensions of religious practice. *Lumen Gentium* proposed a new model for the church that is present in the world it seeks to serve. Operating in this way, the Second Vatican Council created an imagination for the local church that could attend to the individual believer while also drawing on broader themes of solidarity and community within the global church.

Second, *Gaudium et Spes* or the 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World' represents a marked shift on how the Catholic Church views itself in relation to contemporary society. As stated in the document, "this Second Vatican Council, having probed more profoundly into the mystery of the Church, now addresses itself without hesitation, not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity" (GS, 2). Again, the document framers set out to explain the mission of the local church and how its activity relates to the worldwide church. In so doing, the document makes the argument for a church as a community of believers living in the fullness of Christ.

Using the imagery of family and citing Acts 17:26, *Gaudium et Spes* reads that God "has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood" (GS, 24). Highlighting the intimate relationship between the church and the rest of humanity (including non-believers), Vatican II in this document acknowledges the need for the church to understand the world in which it lives and functions. This model again proposes a dual identity for the church: on the one hand, it is called to its

heavenly ministry where on the other hand it must also confront matters of an earthly nature. Elaborating further, the church is called to compassionately minister to their local population while also strengthening its bond with the worldwide community of Christians. In proposing this two-fold nature, the documents at once recognize the specific identity of the local church while also linking it to the broader universal church and thus to all of humanity. Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* in their own way strive to articulate an identity for the Catholic Church that illuminates its mission in the modern world.

2. Motivation for the First African Synod

Drawing on the major themes embodied in the Second Vatican Council documents, the first African Synod gathered on Monday the 11th of April 1994 with the stated aim of addressing many of the underlying challenges for the growth of the church in Africa. Quite self-consciously, the church leaders in attendance attempted to come to terms with certain socio-political and religious issues plaguing the people of Africa:

At this very time when so much fratricidal hate inspired by political unrest is tearing our peoples apart, when the burden of the international debt and currency devaluation is crushing them, we, the Bishops of Africa, together with all the participants in this holy Synod, united with the Holy Father and with all our Brothers in the Episcopate who elected us, we want to say a word of hope and encouragement to you, the Family of God in Africa to you, the Family of God all over the world: *Christ our Hope is alive; we shall live!*²

Using such a foundation, the first African Synod identified the nature of the African church as family, or perhaps better stated as church as a community of believers in Christ.

From a religious standpoint, this first synod was charged with a rather daunting task. In emphasizing the model of church as family in God, the synod relied heavily on the history of African societal communalism and indigenous belief, exemplified by such African statesman as Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah.³ Conversely, from a specifically Christian perspective, the

²Synod Documents, "Message of the Synod," in ed., Maura Browne, *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, 72.

³Regarding the indigenous African communalistic perspective, Tanzania's first President Julius Nyerere writes, "Both the 'rich' and the 'poor' individual were

bishops of the synod drew on the image of the Holy Family of Nazareth as an agent of evangelization. Engaging both aspects of African identity – the traditional African concept of community and the Christian concept of family as community – the first African Synod attempted to create a space where ancient beliefs could communicate with the Catholic structures in a process called enculturation. In drawing on the ethnic identity of the population, the church in Africa became an institution that encouraged local churches to respond to the needs of its own people.⁴

The image of the African family in God is a striking image, one that resonates with traditional ideas of African communalism. The central concept of human dignity as well as the underlying issue of equality is central to the synod's understanding of self-identity and African-ness. With such an overarching religious connotation, the first African Synod attempted to establish the link between historical African pastoralism and Vatican II, between the old system of belief and the new. Indeed, in 1994 the first African Synod put forth the model of the enculturated African Catholic Church as one Christian community united together through love of Christ.⁵

From an African perspective, one of the major obstacles facing the church in the period immediately following colonialism stemmed from the belief that the church wasn't authentically African at its roots. Rather, while the Bible had been translated into innumerable African languages over the past two centuries, "[d]espite initial attempts at inculturation [*sic*] since Vatican II, the church in Africa still appears foreign and sometimes also colonial to the local people."⁶ Following the precedent of *Lumen Gentium*, the bishops of the first synod understood that the church does not become truly local until it

completely secure in African society. Natural catastrophe brought famine, but it brought famine to everybody—'poor' or 'rich.' Nobody starved, either of food or of human dignity, because he lacked personal wealth; he could depend on the wealth possessed by the community of which he was a member. That was socialism. That is socialism." Julius K. Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, Dar Es Salam, Tanzania: Oxford University Press, 1968, 4.

⁴Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, "The Birth and Development of a Local Church," in ed., Maura Browne, *The African Synod*, 4.

⁵Elias O. Opongo, "Inventing Creative Approaches to Complex Systems of Injustice: A New Call for a Vigilant and Engaged Church," in ed., A.E. Orobator *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace*, 75.

⁶New People Media Center, "An Analysis of the Church in Africa," in ed., Maura Browne, *The African Synod*, 16

is able to adopt certain indigenous religious practices and forms of worship that are “inspired by its unique character, culture, history, actual context and vision for the future.”⁷ Religious leaders throughout the African continent conjured their own vision of the church as people of God using the example of Vatican II, yet neglected to acknowledge certain indigenous elements of religious worship. In this post-Vatican II conception of the church, religious leaders called for a church that would meet the local needs of their constituent congregations while also allowing for traditional ideas and practices to operate below the surface of worship.

The enculturated church of the first African Synod vocalized its mission and identity, hoping to confront the problems immediately experienced by its core of believers and signalling an acknowledgement of the changing religious landscape throughout the continent. Highlighting the positive aspects of African traditional belief, the synod sought to identify the aspirations and concerns of the local church by recognizing and affirming certain indigenous beliefs (such as ancestor worship) that more fully allowed religious believers to practice their own forms of African Christianity.⁸ With this understanding of the local church, the teachings of Vatican II coupled with traditional African religious practice can be seen as instrumental in deconstructing some of the major issues facing Catholic Church in Africa during this period of post-colonial independence.

3. The Second African Synod

Fifteen years later, the second African Synod gathered in 2009 with the express purpose of bridging the enculturated church of Vatican II with a more globalized Christianity. Using the model of

⁷New People Media Center, “An Analysis of the Church in Africa,” 15.

⁸Bénézet Bujo, “On the Road to an African Ecclesiology” in ed., Maura Browne, *The African Synod*, 139 ff. On the topic of ancestor worship, Bujo writes: “A genuinely African ecclesiology seems to rely on a correct understanding of community and family.” The place of the ancestor in the traditional worship schema “to whom the founding of the clan community may be attributed, plays an indispensable role. It is the primordial ancestor who is the sustaining force for later ancestors, who form a chain of unity and through whom the contemporary generation is able to trace its origins back to the first ancestor. In this bipolar community of the living and the dead, including the primordial ancestor, no one lives for himself or herself alone. The life that has been received from God via primordial ancestor must not be lived selfishly; rather, it must be placed by each member in the service of this bi-dimensional community” (Page 140).

reconciliation, justice, and peace, the identity of the church in Africa may be understood as systematically developing over time to address the needs of its people while also acknowledging the specific socio-historical context within which it is operating. This synod consciously sought to create a new theological framework which allowed participants to address some of the major ethical issues facing contemporary African society. On this topic, Fr Orobator writes, “[i]n this age of globalization, when multiple centers of power, influence, and action intersect in the world, the [second African Synod] defines for both church and society a new way of interrelating and communicating in the human community according to the approach prioritized and recommended by Vatican II.”⁹

The Second Vatican Council did indeed prioritize and recommend a particular approach to engage the local church on its own terms through the process of enculturation. Throughout *Lumen Gentium* the church calls for a community of believers in Christ to come to the aid of the local church (LG, 2). Further, *Gaudium et Spes*, states that Christians are compelled to answer the “joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of women and men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (GS, 1). In both Vatican II documents, the individual believer is called to reformulate their own identity as a member of a wider community working to complete Christ’s vision. Additionally and underscoring the concept of community as inherently relational, the community is called with other Christians to care for those marginalized members of society operating under the divine directive of ‘love thy neighbour.’ Whereas the first synod advanced the model of the local church in Africa as community, the second engaged the universal church by urging the Christian faithful to come to the aid of anyone who was suffering anywhere throughout the world. The bishops of second African Synod sought to incorporate the first synod’s church as family within a broader ecclesial context using the themes of reconciliation, peace, and justice.

It is precisely in terms of a global Christian community that we can begin to draw the lessons of Vatican II in concert with the second African Synod. While the first synod relied heavily on two foundational documents of Vatican II – *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* – the second African Synod redirected its focus to the wider

⁹A.E. Orobator, “The Synod as Ecclesial Conversation,” 3.

church community. Realistically assessing the relationship of the church to modern African society, the bishops and religious leaders at the latter gathering seemed more concerned with global matters such as interreligious dialogue, international economic disparity, and broader issues of social justice. Stated differently, "reconciliation, justice, and peace [as promoted by the second African Synod] define clear imperative of ecclesial renewal and social transformation."¹⁰ In proposing such a model, the bishops of the second synod acted to simultaneously affirm the uniqueness of the local African church while also promoting the themes of peace, justice, and reconciliation on a global scale. No longer was the African Catholic Church working solely for the immediate needs of its local congregation. Rather, it was enunciating its relationship with the global church to address the needs of the worldwide population.

4. African Indigenous Belief and Vatican II

Focusing on the historical understanding of African society, one must consider the role of community within the traditional African religious perspective as it relates to the synods. The two African Synods were working within a largely new framework, blending domestic theological and ethical aspects of African life with larger global and societal developments. Historically, the first synod occurred at a crucial junction in African history between the Rwandan genocide and the end of apartheid in South Africa. Both socio-political events carried considerable ethical weight, not only for the countries in which they occurred but also for the entire continent. Little wonder the model adopted by the second African Synod attempted to incorporate aspects from the previous synod with historical and global events that occurred during the nearly twenty years between the two ecclesial gatherings.

Where the first synod sought to consider the self-identity of the church in Africa, the bishops taking part in the latter synod attempted to articulate a lasting account of the nature and activity of the church in light of political upheaval, social change, and warfare throughout the continent. Reflecting on such widespread suffering, the bishops looked to *Gaudium et Spes* for a position that would confront the reality of the African Catholic Church in global and human terms. Concerning human dignity, the document maintains

¹⁰A.E. Orobator, "The Synod as Ecclesial Conversation," 1.

that whatever insults the inherent dignity of the individual is anathema to the mission of the church, including “subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men and women are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons” (GS, 27).

Similarly, from an African indigenous perspective, equality and the dignity of the individual can be seen as being upheld by the community as a whole. When Tanzania’s first President Julius Nyerere speaks of traditional African society, he places the good of the community over the good of the individual. For Nyerere, the community is significantly more important than the individual, since the individual could be sacrificed but community could never be compromised.¹¹ In this indigenous belief framework, members of the society would be bound together in a return to traditional African values where the love of one’s neighbour is manifest through placing the community over the individual.

Regarding traditional belief, one figure in the study of African Catholicism, Fr Bénézet Bujo SJ writes, “while one person’s good contributes to greater life for everyone... if we talk in terms of harmonious community life or of ruined relations between people we are dealing with a holistic view which involves God and the whole cosmos as well.” Since life can only reach its full potential in interdependence with other members of the larger community “[f]or Africans, community touches on the relationship with God, the dead, the living, the not-yet-born, and the whole universe.”¹² From this, every individual action contributes to the overall health of the community, seen in the model of church as family of the first synod. Yet there remains a distinct link between peace, justice, reconciliation, and the model of church as family and community from both the African traditional belief perspective and from Vatican II.

Gaudium et Spes notes that community is not only a practical necessity for all humans, but that it is also God’s divine will. On the topic of God’s commandments for the earthly society, the document

¹¹Chambi Chachage, *Africa’s Liberation: The Legacy of Nyerere*, Cape Town, South Africa: Pambazuka Press, 2010, 149.

¹²Bénézet Bujo, “Community Ethics,” in *AIDS in Africa: Theological Reflections* ed., Bénézet Bujo and Michael Czerny, Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007, 69.

reads “the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life.” It continues, “Since this social life is not something added on to man, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny” (GS, no. 25). In promoting the ideals of peace, justice, and reconciliation the church as community and family calls for a society in which the whole person can mature both physically and spiritually, which then fosters the inherent dignity of the individual. The individual is thus called to take part in the greater common good of the society as a whole, united together as brothers in one human family.¹³

After all, peace, justice, and reconciliation do not occur in isolation. Rather, they call for a community – a family – as does the church in Africa. For the entire continent, the synods can be seen as embodying the basic lessons of Vatican II intertwined with traditional African belief systems. The models of church as family and a call to peace, justice, and reconciliation can be seen in the overarching charge towards community building throughout Africa.

5. Conclusion

“Thanks to Vatican II and subsequent work,” writes theologian Yvon Christian Elenga from Congo-Brazzaville “the church in Africa today has found its way between two seeming opposites: fidelity to the universal church and creativity according to local context and culture.” During the fifteen years between the African Synods and reflecting the legacy of the Second Vatican Council, “the mission of the church in the public sphere reveals its theological self-understanding and allows for better participation in the promotion of

¹³*Gaudium et Spes*, no 56. On the topic of the common good within the Catholic social teaching tradition, theologian Jacques Maritain writes: “The end of society is the good of the community, of the social body. But if the good of the social body is not understood to be a common good of human persons, just as the social body itself is a whole of human persons, this conception also would lead to other errors of a totalitarian type. The common good is neither a mere collection of private goods, nor the proper good of a whole which, like the species with respect to its individuals or the hive with respect to its bees, relates the parts to itself alone and sacrifices them to itself. It is the good human life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons, it is their communion in good living. It is therefore common to both the whole and the parts into which it flows back and which, in turn, must benefit from it.” Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1947, 50-51.

reconciliation, justice, and peace. This mission calls for a prophetic engagement of the church with the state and with society.”¹⁴

The African Synods occurred at a time when the church in Africa strove to identify its nature and mission in the face of regional and continental instability. Between 1994 and 2009, the synods focused on certain overarching matters of religious and ethical significance while also elucidating the relationship between the church, the state, and society in Africa. From the first synod’s church as family in God to the second synod’s model of peace, justice, and reconciliation, the church developed a critical self-identity that drew not only on the themes and models promoted by the Second Vatican Council, but it also attempted to incorporate aspects from African traditional belief within Catholic worship as an enculturated church. By stressing the relationship between this indigenous belief and the teachings of Vatican II, the African Synods strengthened the view that these two forms of religious practice are compatible within the larger African worldview.

Further, in struggling with the political and social issues facing the contemporary Catholic Church in Africa – such as tribal warfare, genocide, illiteracy, and poverty – the synods advanced the role of individual empowerment through the community with the model of church as family. Following from *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium*, it is only through social life of the individual through the life of the community promoted by the first synod that we can even begin to approach the ideals of peace, justice, and reconciliation of the second synod. And while society is plagued by human and earthly ills, following the lessons of the Second Vatican Council the African Catholic Church strives to embody the teachings and message of Jesus Christ in both the local and global church.

¹⁴Yvon Christian Elenga, “Toward a New Social Configuration? The Role of the Catholic Church in the Public Sphere,” in ed., A.E. Orobator *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace*, 93.