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# The Challenge of Interculturality and Contextualisation in Theologising in Africa

## Reflections on Missed Opportunities

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# THE CHALLENGE OF INTERCULTURALITY AND CONTEXTUALISATION IN THEOLOGISING IN AFRICA. REFLECTIONS ON MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

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## Introduction

The need for contextualising theology with its related areas of formation, liturgy, catechesis, Church Law, and others is not limited to Africa. We can even say that theologising necessarily implies contextualising since the one doing theology is always situated in a cultural, historical, geographical and cultural context. That is why I would like to include the term contextualisation in this discussion because it is more encompassing. It includes the cultural element. Interculturality emphasises the fact that in doing theology one must consider the fact that there are different cultures involved at different levels. It can refer to the fact the teacher and the learner do not belong to the same culture. At another level, even “official” theology has an intercultural aspect because the members of the Magisterium also belong to their respective cultures. What they say and write leaves a cultural imprint on official theology. In this discussion the two terms will be used according to where I find each most fitting, although in some cases they will be used interchangeably.

However, the issue of contextualisation and interculturality takes on specific accents in the context of Africa because Africa was evangelised by the Western Christians after the latter Western Christianity had developed traditions, disciplines and modes of celebration which, in some cases, are considered to be “universal”. That is why for a long time churches in Africa were, and are still sometimes, referred to as young or missionary churches. This did not only refer to chronology of foundation but also to what the older churches saw as African Churches not being able to manage affairs on their own. Some Encyclicals bring this out.<sup>1</sup> Because of this we sometimes find interculturality issues being confused with ideological and academic matters. In some cases this historical datum has sometime impacted negatively on Africa. With time the term inculturation is used to emphasise the need to use African cultures to proclaim the gospel and to do theology. Another fact linked to what has been said above is that most of the African Catholic Churches belong to the “Roman” or “Latin” Rite. Strictly speaking, this has nothing to do with whether theologising is appropriate or not. It simply means that in a certain tradition or rite, the Church has developed a specific way of theologising, celebrating and living. For example in the Roman Catholic Church, celibacy for priests is compulsory,<sup>2</sup> while in the Catholic Oriental Churches, it is optional under certain circumstances. It is not out of place therefore to suggest that with time the Churches in Africa will also develop their own rite with a particular discipline, theology and mode of celebration. Several official documents have invited the African Churches to do this as we will see here below, but we will see that this invitation has not been properly translated into ecclesial and theological practices. At the end of this discussion, we will try to find out why this has been the case. Let us now turn our attention to some documents on inculturation although chronologically the term was not used in some of those documents. I will use older documents to emphasise that the need to inculturate was seen long before the theologians used the term.

## Some Official Church Documents on Contextualisation

### *The Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity of Vatican II*

The Decree *Ad Gentes* on the Church’ Missionary Activity of Vatican II can be taken to be one

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, of 30 November 1919, and Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones*, of 2 June 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Even in the Roman Rite, sometimes there are exceptions to this rule when an Anglican priest converts to Catholicism.

of the best founding documents on inculturation. Although it contains some doctrinal cautions and qualifications, its no. 22 gives a springboard and justification for doing contextual theology.<sup>3</sup> It says that the young Churches

“borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator. To achieve this, it is necessary that in each of the great socio-cultural regions...theological investigation should be encouraged and the facts and words revealed by God, contained in sacred Scripture, and explained by the Fathers and Magisterium of the Church, submitted to a new examination in the light of the tradition of the universal Church.”<sup>4</sup>

It is noteworthy that in the document adaptation is theologically grounded in the mystery of the incarnation which can be seen as a justification for contextualisation. By becoming a human being, Jesus is subject to the contextual and intercultural contingencies which are no longer to be seen as a problem but which have to be properly managed. The missionary Churches are not just invited to do adaptation but to carry out original theological investigation to the extent of submitting facts and words revealed by God to a new examination. The only limitation qualification here is that this should be done “in the light of the tradition of the universal Church.”

### *Paul VI's Evangelii Nuntiandi*

After the Bishops' Synod on Evangelisation in the Modern World, Paul VI issued an Apostolic Exhortation called *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The document does not address the problem of inculturation as such but highlights the importance of evangelising cultures so that they are transformed from within. The Pope also regrets the split between the gospel and culture. In no. 20, he says that “The gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of life of man.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to note that while evangelisation cannot be put in the same category with any culture, “...the kingdom of God ... is put into practice by men who are imbued with their own particular culture, and in the building up of the kingdom it is inevitable that some elements of these human cultures must be introduced.”<sup>6</sup> Using an idea we already found in *Ad Gentes*, Paul VI says that the gospel and evangelisation are not necessarily incompatible with human cultures.<sup>7</sup> In this text, we can say that it is implied that it is not only evangelisation which penetrates cultures; some elements of culture penetrate evangelisation. In fact in order to evangelise and do theology, one must use cultural tools. It is in the context of what is said above that one can appreciate the Pope's words deploring separating the gospel and culture. “The rift between the gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times just as it has been in other eras. Accordingly we must devote all our resources and our efforts to the sedulous evangelisation of

<sup>3</sup> One can find a translation of the original Latin text into different languages in different publications. For the English translation, I will use Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975, and the electronic version found on the Vatican website, “Decree Ad Gentes on the Mission Activity”, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html). For comparative purposes, see the French and Latin texts in *Concile Eocuménique Vatican II: Constitutions, Décrets, Déclarations, Messages*, Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1967.

<sup>4</sup>Vatican II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), 7 December 1965, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1977, no. 22. Given the importance of this document, the whole number should be read to appreciate its originality.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, Vatican Collection, vol. II, Leominster, Herefords: Fowler Wright Books Ltd., 1982, no. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

human culture...”<sup>8</sup>

### **Contextualisation in Canon Law**

While promulgating the 1983 Code of Canon Law, John Paul II insisted on the fact that the Code must be seen as an attempt to translate Vatican II ecclesiology into a legal language. The Code therefore must be read with the documents of Vatican II.<sup>9</sup> In no. 22 of *Ad Gentes*, the Council expresses a wish that episcopal conferences should coordinate efforts of adaptation “with one mind and a common plan.”<sup>10</sup> However, we should note that the institution of episcopal conference does not have a clear position in the legal and ecclesiological life of the Church.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, a lot of responsibilities are entrusted to it in the Code of Canon Law in 29 canons in areas which require contextualisation and adaptation. These include formation of permanent deacons, statutes for presbyteral councils, norms for arranging the catechumenate, norms for religious education in schools and media, and adapting rite of initiation.<sup>12</sup>

### **An Analysis**

The few cases presented above are examples of the official Church being open to contextualisation. What is surprising is that we do not find many examples of work that has been done to implement this on the ground.<sup>13</sup> An exception to this can be found in the attempt of the Congolese Church to use in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist what has been called the Zairian Rite. However in this particular case, although the Roman Congregations concerned were consulted and gave permission to use the Rite, it turned out that problems arose in relation to including veneration of the ancestors in the Mass.<sup>14</sup> Even when permission was given to use the said Rite, the official title of the Missal was: *Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre (sic)* [Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaïre].<sup>15</sup> Worse still, when John Paul II visited Congo in 1980, the Roman Congregation for Sacraments cancelled the use of the Zairian rite.<sup>16</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The text of John Paul II’s Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, of 25 January 1983, promulgating the Code of canon Law can be found in The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, ed., *The Code of Canon Law*, London: Collins, pp. xi-xv.

<sup>10</sup> See Vatican II, op cit.

<sup>11</sup>Some time back I wrote a few pages about this subject., See Peter Kanyandago, “Competence of Episcopal Conferences in Church Law”, n. d. For some more reflections on contextualisation see Peter Kanyandago, “Ordained and Non-Ordained Ministry in the Local Church”, in Agatha Radoli, ed., *How Local Is the Local Church: Small Christian Communities and Church in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, Spearhead 126-128, 1993, pp. 139-162 and “Un droit particulier pour les Eglises d’Afrique: rêve ou réalité?” (A particular law for the Churches in Africa: a dream or reality) in F. Malolo, A. Ramazani, M. Moerschbacher and L. Santedi, (eds.), *Pour une institution des laïcs dans l’Eglise: Africains et Européens en quête de renouveau conciliaire*, (For an institution of the laity in the Church: Africans and Europeans in search of conciliar renewal), Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004, pp. 135-159.

<sup>12</sup>For details about the relevant canons see Peter Kanyandago, “Competence”, pp. 4-6. See also a detailed presentation of these canons in James A. Coriden et al., eds., *The Code of Canon Law. A text and Commentary*, Commissioned by the Canon Law Society of America, New York: Paulist Press, 1985, pp. 370. There are 53 other canons in which Episcopal Conferences are mentioned. See Ibid., pp. 370-372.

<sup>13</sup> In Luke G. Millo and Nathanaël Y. Soédé, eds., *Doing Theology and Philosophy in the African Context*, Frankfurt am Main: IKO, 2003, we find clear indications from the African Catholic universities and institutes that the training in theology and philosophy is not yet contextualised.

<sup>14</sup>A very well presented article on the Zairean Rite is by Chris Nwaka Egbulem, “An African Interpretation of Liturgical Inculturation: The *Rite Zairois* in Michael Downey and Richard Fragomeni, eds., *A Promise of Presence*, Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1992. On the problem of ancestor veneration see Ibid. p. 231. Other related and interesting articles: Paul Bekye, “African Traditional Religion in Church Documents”, on <http://afrikaworld.net/afrel/atrxadoc> and Chukwudum Barnabas Okolo, “The African Experience on Christian Values: Dimensions of the Problematic”, on [http://www.crvp.org/book/series02/II-3/chpater\\_xi.html](http://www.crvp.org/book/series02/II-3/chpater_xi.html)

<sup>15</sup> See Egbulem, op. cit., p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> See Okolo, op. cit., p. 4.

implications are enormous: the Rite is Roman but for Zaire. This goes against what no. 22 of *Ad Gentes* stipulates.

Similar ambiguity and misgivings which manifest real tension in the position of the Church about what is written and the translation of this on the ground are found in Paul VI's address during one Mass in his visit to Uganda in 1969. While he unequivocally first says: "By now, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves. The Church of Christ is well and truly planted in this blessed soil", later he adds, "Your Church must be first of all catholic, that is, it must be entirely founded upon the identical, essential, constitutional patrimony of the self-same teaching of Christ, as professed by the authentic and authoritative tradition of the one true church."<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As a conclusion, we can say that while there are official documents allowing African Churches to contextualise in different areas, there have been few successful implementations of this because of the following reasons. Firstly, despite its openness to contextualisation, the official Church still expresses unease with regard to authentic inculturation. Secondly, the African Church leaders and theologians manifest some fear in assuming their responsibilities. This could be due to the hurts that they have experienced in their cultural identity. It is difficult for somebody who has been hurt in his/her cultural identity to create and be innovative. Thirdly, in Africa Church leaders have not worked together with the theologians and Christians at grassroots level, as this happened in Latin America, to develop a theology that is relevant. Despite all this and the opportunities that have been missed, the African Church still has a chance to inculturate the gospel.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.