The Church as a Family of God’s People: An African Perspective

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Abstract:
The desire to belong is one important aspect of humankind. Certainly to be a member of a family is a blessing and more so to belong to God’s family—the Church. The article discussed extensively the Church and the African family using historical method. It was discovered that the first two attempts of Christianity into Africa failed because it was not rooted in African culture. The article plumbed into some aspects of African culture that could help the Church in Africa to stand solid. It became clear that the model of the extended family system in Africa was paramount. Furthermore, the Incarnation model where Jesus incarnated himself into the Jewish culture was also to be adopted. In light of these analyses and discussions, the article recommended the implementation of inculturation as a way forward for the building of a solid well rooted African Church as a family of God’s people.

Keywords: Africa, Catholic Church, Culture, Family, God, Inculturation, Nigeria.

Introduction
This article, the church as a family of God’s people: An African perspective has two pronged dimensions viewed from one eye-lens. On one side, we have the church, on the other side there is a family of God’s people both bonded together by Africa. The church in Africa bears African character which makes it identifiable in the universal church where it is part and parcel. Oduyoye (1997, p.74) expresses this idea subtly. “The church is good news if in its liturgical and other practices it takes into account the dynamism and complexity of African culture, championing its empowering character.” One way of championing African character in this case is by promoting this aspect of African culture which is deeply rooted in the family which is expressly known as the extended family system. The family in general and African family in particular is very central in this article because it is the ‘sanctuary of life’ and a ‘vital cell’ of the society and the church. This article, therefore, explores the various ways the church could discover the Africanness in the African family so as to use these good qualities to build deeply rooted church in Africa that will enhance the course of the universal church for the Glory of God. Our journey of faith generally begins from family. The church as mother recognises this and identifies itself with this vital principle. The methodology that directs this article is historical, analytical and descriptive. It is historical because it traces the church’s movement from the time of Pentecost to the time it left Europe to North Africa. It analyses the three phases of the church’s attempts to evangelize Africa, describes and discusses these up and down narrative stories. This article examines and encapsulates the wisdom of the adoption of church as a family of God in Africa with its future prospects in the continent.
Brief Meaning and Explanation of the word Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) gives a comprehensive meaning of the word church in this first paragraph:

The word ‘church’ (Latin ecclesia, from the Greek ek-kalein, to call out of); means a convocation or assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people usually for a religious purpose. Ekklesia is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly on Mount Sinai where Israel received the law and was established by God as his holy people. By calling itself ‘church,’ the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly. In the church, God is calling his people together from all the ends of the earth. The equivalent Greek term Kyriake, from which the English word Church and German Kirche are derived, means ‘what belongs to the Lord (CCC. 751).

What follows below is illustrative explanation of the same word ‘Church by the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

In Christian usage the word ‘Church designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. The church is the people that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in the local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic assembly. She draws her life from the Word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body (CCC. 752).

These two paragraphs of the Catechism of the Catholic Church have given us both the meaning and the explanation of the word ‘Church’ However, some expressions such as ‘the people of God’, the ‘Body of Christ’, God’s new community are to be explained with examples at their proper contexts in our discussions. Before then, it is expedient to bring forward the origin of the word ‘Church’.

The Origin of the Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 767) gives a Biblical origin of the Church in these words:

When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that he might continually sanctify the Church. Then the Church was openly displayed to the crowd and the spread of the Gospel among the Nations, through preaching was begun. As the convocation of all men (women) for Salvation, the Church in her very nature is missionary sent by Christ to all the nations to make disciples of them.

In the narrative above the Catechism of Catholic Church has successfully and conveniently brought together the events that took place in Acts of the Apostle (2:1-13), as well as Jesus sending the apostles on mission with mandates on what to do (Matt 28:19-20). The Church nature is missionary.

The Church as the People of God

While we refer the Church as the people of God, we at the same time recall that the expression ‘the people of God’ has a history. At their encounter with Yahweh while still in Egypt, God revealing himself further to the Israelites in Exodus 6:7 said “I will take you for my people and you will know that I am Yahweh your God who delivered you from the slavery of the Egyptians” Affirming the covenant that will remain permanently in the heart of the Israelites, God speaking from the mouth of Jeremiah (Jeremiah31:31-33) the prophet declares, “the time is coming it is Yahweh who speaks when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people of Judah, not like the one I made with their fathers on that day I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt… This is the covenant I shall make with Israel and after that time: “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts, I will be their God and they will be my people.” With this historical Biblical background, Lumen Gentium chapter II paragraph 9 states:
At all times and among every people, God has given welcome to whoever fears him and does what is right. It has pleased God; however, to make men (women) holy and save them not merely as individuals without any mutual bonds, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serve Him in holiness. He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto himself. With it He set up a covenant... All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant which was to be ratified in Christ... Christ instituted this new covenant that is to say the New Testament in his Blood (1 Cor 11:25), by calling together a people made up of Jews and Gentiles, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit.

It is a very systematic historical chronicle which offers hope to Jews and non-Jews. Adding its voice to this universal call, the Catholic Encyclopedia (1996, p. 745) comments: 'Membership in the people of God is based not in racial or ethnic kingship, but on the call of God, his covenant of Grace, and his gift of the Spirit.' It is in this impetus that Africans claim their inheritance in this people of God. This true membership is further authenticated by the Sacrament of Baptism which Kung (1981, p. 109) describes as 'the initiation rite of the new fellowship.' Elaborating on this new fellowship, Kung continues: 'This rite shows that the eschatological community is not just a vague movement or a mere fellowship of like-minded people but a community with historical form: a Church.' As baptised member of the church, these people of God have a responsibility. Lumen Gentium reminds the faithful of the importance their status by baptism and their responsibility thus: 'Incorporated into the church through baptism, the faithful are consecrated by the baptismal character to the exercise of the cult of the Christian religion. Reborn as children of God, they must confess before men and women the faith which they have received from God through the Church.' Through the Sacrament of confirmation, they are endowed by the Holy Spirit with special strength which further obliges them to defend their faith by word and by deed. These full members of the church are privileged to take part in the Eucharistic sacrifice known as the ‘fount and apex of the whole Christian life.’ In this Eucharistic sacrifice, therefore, they offer the ‘divine victim to God and offer themselves along with it.’ It is interesting to take note how Peter describes this people of God: ‘You are a chosen race, a community of a priest-kings, a consecrated nation, a people God has made his own to proclaim his wonders. For he called you from your darkness to his own wonderful light. At one stage you were no people, but now you are God’s people. You had not received his mercy, but now you have been given mercy’ (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Belonging to this special people of God is a privilege we must cherish and defend. Hinsdale (2007, P.1025) argues that “belonging to this community of God’s people is always understood eschatologically that is, the church is ever on the way of becoming God’s people. They find the realization of this relationship awaits the fullness of the reign of God.” As members of the church regarded as the people of God, they are also qualified to be God’s own community an inclusive name that empowers Africans to be called the people of God in the church.

The Church in Africa

The church in Africa has witnessed what the historians call three phases or three attempts or still three waves. This section explores circumstances that led to these three attempts and the outcome of each attempt. Buhlmann (1976, p. 150) describing the church in Africa has this to say: “During the first wave, Christianity gained a footing in North Africa from Egypt to Morocco and Southwards as far as Ethiopia and the region of Chad.” Referring to specifics Buhlmann continues: “In the fifth century in North Africa there were about 500 Catholic Bishops and many Donatists. The African Fathers made a notable contribution to the church’s theological heritage.” Quoting his predecessor Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II recalls those names that made the church in Africa great in these words:
We think of these countless Saints, Martyrs, Confessors and Virgins and recall the fact that from the second to the fourth centuries Christian life in the North of Africa was most vigorous and had a leading place in theological study and literary production. The names of the great doctors and writers come to mind, men like Origen, Saint Athanasius and Saint Cyril, leaders of the Alexandrian school, and at the other end of the North African coastline, Tertullian, Saint Cyprian and above all Saint Augustine one of the most brilliant lights of the Christian world (1995, p. 25-26).

Not forgetting the important roles the women played the Pope emphasizes:

During these first centuries of the church in Africa, certain women also bore their own witness to Christ. Among them Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, Saint Monica and Saint Thecla are particularly deserving of mention (p. 26).

Honouring the early African Popes of blessed memory, Pope John Paul II pays this homage:

These noble examples, as also the saintly African popes, Victor I, Melchiades and Gelasius I, belong to the common heritage of the church and the Christian writers of Africa remain today a basic source for deepening our knowledge of the history of salvation in the light of the Word of God (p.26).

Unfortunately all these glorious moments and achievements came to an abrupt end with very few traces of survival. Buhlmann laments this situation thus: “In the long run, however, only the Copts of Egypt and Ethiopia managed to resist the victorious march of Islam.” We reserve our questions till we have examined the second phase of the church in Africa.

The second phase brought to the fore the roles the Portuguese explorers and missionaries played in Africa. The second phase which took place between 15th and 16th centuries saw the exploration of the African coast by the Portuguese the activity of which was accompanied by the evangelization of the regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. The arrears covered include: Congo, the region of the Cape and East Africa. Others are the present days Benin Sao Tome, Angola, Mozambique and Madagascar. An outstanding achievement of the time was clear to Pope John Paul II who confirms: “A certain number of Episcopal Sees were erected during the period, and one of the first fruits of that missionary endeavours was a consecration in Rome, by Pope Leo X in 1518, of Don Henrique, the son of Don Alfonso I, king of Congo, as Titular Bishop of Utica. Don Henrique thus became the first native Bishop of Black Africa” (p. 27). As the first attempt ended so also the second which Pope John Paul II describes thus: “Because of various difficulties the second phase of the evangelization of Africa came to an end in the 18th century, with the disappearance of practically all the missions South of the Sahara” (p.27). After two unsuccessful attempts, the third phase, which persists till today is like Achebe’s pronouncement in his book things fall apart where is said “Obiageli has come to stay.” It was in the 19th century that the third phase started with growth and success which Pope John Paul II described as “a marvellous work of divine grace.” The remarkable events of this phase have been identified and recorded with hope that more are yet to follow. Pope John Paul II remarks:

The glory and splendour of the present period of Africa’s evangelization are illustrated in a truly admirable way by the saints whom modern Africa has given to the church. Pope Paul VI eloquently expressed this when he canonized the Ugandan martyrs in St Peter’s Basilica on World Mission Day, 1964. These African martyrs add a new page to that list of victorious men and women that we call martyrology, in which we find the most magnificent as well as the most tragic stories (p.28).

Praising Africa for the number of saints she has produced in the course of time but especially this third phase, Pope John Paul II explains:

The list of saints that Africa gives to the church, the list that is the greatest title of honour continues to grow. How can we fail to mention among the most recent, Blessed Clementine Anwarite, Virgin and martyr of Zaire… Blessed Victoria Rasoumanarivo of Madagascar and Blessed
This statement of Pope John Paul II is a great challenge to African biblical scholars, theologians, researchers and writers of various categories. In the two failed attempts the church that was founded in African soil was not fully prepared that time to be called African church because it was not deeply rooted in African culture. In the two failed attempts, the moment the missionaries that brought the gospel went back to their countries or were killed, the message they brought died off and disappeared. Our discussion on the models of the church takes us to the church as the extended family of God’s people.

The Church as the Extended family of God

One of the models of the church the African bishops adopted is the church as the extended family of God. This section discusses the extended family in Africa in line with the church as the extended family of God. The church as we have discussed above means an assembly. In this assembly, God calls the people together for a purpose. In the same way, the African people live this togetherness in a unique way as members of the extended family. The African family is based on extended family system where the grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and children are considered as members of the family. Since grandparents are part of the extended family, they are looked after at their old age by the other members of the family. In the original old African extended family there was no mention of nuclear family. The old grandparents were never put in old peoples’ homes. While in Igbo culture, children call their grandfather ‘papa nnukwu.’ In Zimbabwe Shona culture children call their grandfather ‘baba mukuru.’ The grandmother is ‘mama nnukwu’ and ‘mai mukuru’ respectively. Furthermore, the children regard the brother of their father as their father and the wife as their mother. This shows how these family members are bonded together in relationship. Things have changed because of the interaction with the Western culture. Tangan (2000, p. 47) describing a similar situation among the Dagara people in Ghana has this to say: “Most extended houses are made up of segments or households of two to four generations living under the headship of the senior male. Such segments are identified by the name of the family head. The symbolic centre of a segment is the main granary. People of the same segment till the same farm land and eat together…” Since members of the church are members of various extended families, this extended family system should reflect in the African church. Using the word ‘metaphor’ to describe the church as the extended family of God, Healey and Sybertz (1996) explain:

In the great extended family of God, the Father is the chief ancestor; Jesus is the eldest brother, who is a loving and caring brother. The Saints are the Christian ancestors. This family incorporates all peoples, all races and all ethnic groups. All peoples are sons and daughters of God who are spread all over a world-wide family of past and future generations. This extended family includes the distant ancestors, the living dead, the living and those not yet born (p. 123).

In a close analysis of the quotations from Tangan and Healey and Sybertz, it becomes appropriate to visualize the African Church as a large extended family homestead with different houses in the same compound and other similar homesteads in the same neighbourhood. On Sunday; for example, people from various families gather at the parish church as one family—one unit to celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. They are brought together by Christ who sacrificed his life for them to make them holy in the presence of God the Father and to get them united to God the Father since they did not belong to the community of Israel. Paul explains this beautifully thus: “For Christ is our Peace, he who has made the two people one, destroying in his own flesh the wall—the hatred which separated us. He abolished the law with its commands and precepts. He made peace in uniting the two peoples in him, creating out of...
the two one new man. He destroyed hatred and reconciled us both to God through the cross making the two one body” (Eph 2:14-16).

The unity of the church is rooted in the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In African culture, three equal stones are used to support the cooking pot for it to stand firm. Therefore, for a cooking pot to boil and cook the food, it must stand on the three stones which support each other. In the Catholic celebration of the Holy Eucharist, for the bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of Christ, the Holy Trinity must be invoked. As extended family, the church in Africa will grow and bear abundant good fruits when the members see themselves as one family in the presence of the Holy Trinity—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is undivided. Therefore the church in Africa must remain united as one extended family.

The Ecclesiology of the Church as a Family of God

A brief history here serves as an introduction to this section. In the beginning we were one family with God as our Father. However, through sin, this race of ours became distorted and a dysfunctional family.” In his great mercy God’s design in history has been to repair and transform this wounded familial fellowship. Tracing God’s initial design to Israel and later to Jesus, Schepers (199) argues:

That the struggle of the people of Israel to respond to God’s covenantal initiative was the initial realization of this design; that the Christian community, brought about through the mystery of Jesus passion, death and resurrection, represents a more perfect form of family life with God; and we look forward in hope to the completion of this work of healing and transforming the human family (p. 21).

The teaching of the Catholic Church especially the Synod Fathers on this model of the church in Africa is well represented by Healey and Sybertz (1997, p. 145) in this commentary: “The vision of the church as God’s family has a natural appeal to African people. This ecclesiology of Church-as-Family emphasises the warmth of love among widely extended relationships and an authority that finds its proper context in service.” Explaining the reasons why the African Bishops chose the model of the Church as family, Healey and Sybertz elaborate: “They purposely chose the church as family, they wanted to use the African family as the model of being and living church. The family model includes everyone, baptized and non-baptized; involving every member” (1997, p. 146). The expression ‘the model of being and living church’ is very significant because African culture is characterized by lively activities that portray life and existence. For this lively activity to be enjoyed, it must be participatory where everybody is involved. In ritual celebrations, African culture encourages people to be participants not observers. Pope John Paul II recognizes this thus:

All those privileged to be present at the celebration of the Special Assembly for Africa rejoiced to see how African Catholics assuming a greater responsibility in their local churches and are seeking a deeper understanding of what it means to be both Catholic and African. The celebration of the Special Assembly showed to the whole world that the local churches in Africa hold a rightful place in the Communion of the Church, that they are entitled to preserve and develop their own traditions, without in any way lessening the primacy of the Chair of Peter (1995, p. 13).

From all we have discussed in this section, it is proper and necessary to conclude that the extended African family has the characteristics that ennable it to be the sacred place where the riches of African tradition converge—a tradition of caring, sharing, communion and respect.

Changes/Evolution on African Family and their Effects on African Church

As long as we are living human beings, changes must come. In this section, we are not looking at physical changes that might occur within individual persons; rather we would like to examine, analyse and critique the rate of cultural
and religious changes that had taken place in African families. Conscious of the magnitude of these changes, Getui (1997, p. 39) explains: "The severity, the rapidity, intensity and definiteness of these changes qualifies them to be termed an evolution." The term ‘evolution’ will be used from time to time in this section. It must be stated out rightly that before the advent of colonial masters, Africa was still intact culturally and religiously. With the advent of colonialism, many interfering changes set in. This section; therefore, identifies some key components of the family that will serve as guidelines in our efforts to address the question of this evolution. These include: membership, obligations and responsibilities, the place of marriage and children in African family. The followings are discussed below: membership, marriage, children in African family.

Membership

In African traditional family referred to as extended family, the members of this family include: children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who have their own children and immediate relatives. In the same African extended family, Africans also include their departed relatives who are still ‘alive in the memories’ of the living members. However, in the present African context, it is sad to note that what constituted membership in the past is no longer the same now. Extended family is no longer emphasized as before instead what describes membership of contemporary Africa is ‘nuclear family’ made up of the parents and their children. This strange word ‘nuclear’ has become a dominant terminology in our modern African context. When the colonial masters introduced literary education and the ‘white collar jobs,’ the so called ‘educated Africans’ were no longer confined to their rural village life style. Instead they moved to the urban city centres where people from different backgrounds settled. With this assemblage of people individualism crept in. People started living the life of anonymity where no one cared about the next door neighbour. Getui (1997, p. 41) has a valid point why nuclear family is preferred in urban cities when he argues: “The other factor is that the urban areas are expensive since one has to use a meagre salary to cover the basic needs of food, transport, clothing and shelter; and cannot therefore afford to take in extra person. In the urban centres in Africa, many families choose or prefer to be nuclear.” Sadly; one could observe, even in the rural areas the extended family system is no longer as strong as it was before. Members of the same family that lived individual life-style in the urban cities came back to the rural areas with the same mentality where they prefer to build their separate families surrounded with high-fenced wall with ferocious dogs guarding the entrance gate. It is no longer one-open-air extended family. Summarizing the African family membership system at present, Getui (1997, p. 41) recalls:

*With regard to membership, it can therefore be said that in Africa today the family is leaning more towards the nuclear: There are loose ties of the extended family where people come together in times of need such as funeral, but the trend is also more towards individualism because of economic constraints.*

On can loosely argue in favour of nuclear in urban cities because of economic reasons but the fact is that Africans are fast in losing their cultural values and one such value is the importance of sharing. In order to emphasize the importance of sharing, the Shona people of Zimbabwe said: “It is the witch that eats alone.” That is if you do not want to be called a witch, you must share with your extended family members. Unfortunately, the nuclear family system has made African families uncaring and selfish where some wallow in opulence while the others die of hunger and penury. We should remind our African brothers and sisters this truth; since extended family system lends support to communalism, membership in African family should not allow Western culture to destroy this important African cultural value. Full membership in the extended family system makes meaning when Africans meet as full members of God’s family—the church of God.
The Place of Marriage in Africa

Marriage in African tradition is a joyful event that involves two families. In the past, marriage was not optional in many African countries. Instead it was an essential stage expected of every grown-up member of the family to go through. Marriage is very important for procreation, companionship and mutual assistance. The Southern African Bishops Conference maintains that “marriage became the human bond—the natural institution—for bringing children into the world and rearing them. It is the basic unit on which society is built” (2013, p. 6). As the basic unit on which society is built, parents are always involved by reminding their children that they have reached the age of marriage. Parents insist that they would like to see their grand and great grandchildren before they die. Societies are also concerned when a mature man or woman refuses to marry or get married to a man. Since people live together in extended family system, it is easy to know when a man or woman has reached a marriageable age so as to prevail on him to get married even if it means the members of the family to contribute money for the dowry of the would-be wife. This decision and action is very important so that the man and his family will not be ridiculed. In Igboland; for example, such a man who fails to marry loses his respect in the society and this is what the members of his family would not like to experience. Marriage in African traditional context is a communal activity because the two families of the bride and bridegroom are fully involved. Before the actual marriage takes place, the two families make separate inquiries to be sure the type of people their future in-laws are.

On the other hand, there is a clear difference between the traditional and contemporary marriage because of changes that have set in. Highlighting one of these changes, Getui (1997, p. 44) remarks: “Marriage has become a private affair between the spouses and sometimes not even the parents are involved, let alone informed. This has also contributed toward the individualistic nature of society.” In the following lines, Getui(1997, p. 45) reports:

Another change that is common is that there are inter-ethnic, inter-racial and inter-religious marriages due to wider interaction as the world opens up due to education, trade and other factors. This is a departure from the traditional attitude of marrying within an acceptable sphere.

In the contemporary African context, marriage has experienced many drastic changes. It is a common practice these days to see a Nigerian marrying a Zambian woman even a British or American woman without the consent of the parents. In some cases, those marriages contracted in foreign counties or in proxy have their own problems. A British woman for example who is married by a Nigerian may not comfortably come to live in Nigeria with her children. If the man insists to come back to Nigeria, the woman may object. This objection may lead to separation where the woman and her children stay in London while the man comes back to Nigeria to marry another Nigerian woman. On the other hand, if the man cherishes his wife and children, he may decide to remain in London with his nuclear family thereby neglecting his aged parents, brothers and sisters. In African culture, this neglect violets the value of oneness in the extended family. Certainly, the Igbo culture in particular does not welcome or encourage this type of situation especially when the man is not giving the financial and moral support to the members of his extended family. As a family of God’s people, marriage should not alienate members of the family, instead it should help to build up all the families as one family of God.

The Place of Children in African Family

In the African traditional context, children have special place of great pride where they are honoured and appreciated. Thus in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, the more children a man has, the higher his social status rises. In this context children serve as a social security at old age and also as an asset in continuing the family name. In Igboland specifically, childlessness is considered as a curse. This explains why a man could marry...
another wife that gives him children. For quest of more children, he could marry as many wives as possible. The birth of a child in a family is always received with gratitude and jubilation. Children are considered as gifts of the larger society not just for the immediate family. In some parts of Igboland in Nigeria, some children are given the name ‘nwaora’—child of the community. When a child misbehaves an elder from another family has the right to correct and to discipline that child and the parents of that child will not take offence instead they would go to thank that elder.

It is very disheartening that instead of appreciating the arrival of a child, the contemporary African woman aborts her child before birth and if by mistake the child is born he or she is thrown in dust-bins or toilet pits by a woman that was supposed to be a mother. Those who are lucky are abandoned in public places or nearby orphanage home to be collected by charitable organizations. In many countries of the world, abortion has been legalised. The irony part of this ugly situation is that while some women run from hospital to hospital looking for children, those who have either abort or abandon their own babies to the mercy of charitable organizations. The question the women who abort their children refuse to ask themselves is this: Had their own mother aborted them, would they be alive today? The other side of the question should be: If all children are aborted who will uphold the family and build up the society?

The discussion in this section has some lessons. In the first place it is a fact that society is dynamic and changes are inevitable. The rate at which African families are copying American and European way of life is frightening. The consequence is that African culture is being eroded. Thus while there is need for changes, African families should also keep to the roots that constitute their core values. Another lesson the African families should learn is that no culture is more superior to the other. Therefore African families should not accept any culture imposed on them in the name of receiving grants. The church as a mother should encourage African families to stand on their feet whereby Christ should be incarnated in the African culture. It is important, therefore that African children should be properly trained in African culture before they are allowed to interact with other foreign cultures. When these African children have been well rooted in their culture; then, they are well equipped to meet their counterparts from America and Europe as equals bearing in mind that they are children of God in one family of God where ‘there are no Jews, Greeks or gentiles’ (Gal 3:28). The discussions above have tried to establish the church as a family of God. Our attention now is focussed of family with particular reference to African family.

Family

The family has been considered very important in the previous Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations of both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. These two exhortations are very useful in our discussion in this section. This quotation from Pope Benedict XVI serves as our opening introduction. In his remarks, the Pope describes the family in these enriching words:

*The family is the ‘sanctuary of life’ and a ‘vital cell’ of society and of the church. It is here that the features of a people take shape; it is here that its members acquire basic teachings. They learn to love in as much as they are unconditionally loved, they learn respect for others in as much as they are respected, they learn to know the face of God in as much as they receive a first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in their regard. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and becomes in turn the progenitor of more violence (2011, p. 26-27).*

No wonder, therefore, our society has turned to become the brood of violence because families have failed to give their children the fundamental basic training. Children are exposed at the early age to violence when they watch televisions honouring men and women of violence. The frequent wars where dangerous and destructive weapons are used are shown on televisions and these children who gradually assimilate these acts
of violence in their character. This evil exposure of children to violence should stop if the society should be a peaceful society. In the quotation we have discussed above, we can say that Pope Benedict XVI viewed the family in a general sense. On the other hand, Pope John Paul II focuses his attention on African family when he comments:

In Africa in particular, the family is the foundation on which the social edifice is built. This is why the synod considered the evangelization of the African family a major priority, if the family is to assume in its turn the role of active subject in view of the evangelization of families through families (1995, p. 63).

A family comes into existence through the union of a man and a woman in marriage. In Africa both traditional and church weddings are very important. Mbiti gives two aspects of traditional marriage in this summary form: “There are other societies in which the boy takes the girl so that they live together until she bears a child, and then the wedding rites are performed. In matrilocal societies the man generally goes to live in the home of the wife and these two establish their own household there” (1976, p. 138-139). The writer of this article is more conversant with patrilineal society where the man takes the wife to his family for formal traditional wedding. Recently the church encourages the couple to organize their traditional wedding alongside with the church wedding and this practice is working perfectly well. Some couples begin with church wedding in the morning and proceed to the traditional wedding in the evening. With the traditional and church weddings done, the couple begins their own family in a proper way. The union of the man and his wife brings up children. In African culture, the presence of children plays a vital role in determining the success of the marriage. The absence of children most often leads to polygamy or outright divorce. In spite of the church’s unwillingness to recognize polygamy, its practice in African culture is very strong. Buhlmann is very much aware of this fact when he declares:

Another moral question is posed by wide-spread polygamy. We have been mistaken, up to the present, in our easy condemnation of this institution as a sign of unbridled sexuality. A considerable number of African bishops were born in polygamous marriages. Cardinal Otunga of Kenya; after the consistory in Rome, told press representatives that his own father; as a high chief, had a hundred wives (1976, p. 315).

Polygamy in African culture has at least on outstanding advantage. It saves women from prostitution thereby assuring the stability of marriage in such cases as barrenness which most often leads to divorce. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss in detail patrilineal, the matrilineal and the polygamous marriages. The mention of these words here is to show how they help to build African families.

African families include: father, mother, children together with the extended families. When the family is well established through traditional and church weddings, one expects a healthy family to be characterized by the fundamental elements of peace, justice and love between the members of that family. With this mutual understanding and the prevalence of peace, the cooperation of all brings about a loving concern for the members in different ways. For example, the young, the weak, the sick and the aged are cared for in the best way possible. Furthermore, mutual help in the necessities of life, readiness to accept others and as often as possible; to forgive them when misunderstanding occurs, are evidences of a healthy peaceful family. The family is remarkably the best setting for learning and applying the culture of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation.

Pope John Paul II (1975) was very conscious on the influence of foreign cultures when he warned. While adopting the positive value of modernity, the African family must preserve its own essential values. In order to buttress the weightiness of the warning of Pope John Paul II, I equally consider the comment of Pope Benedict XVI relevant when he advised, the family needs to be protected and defended so that it may offer society the service expected of it, that of providing men and women capable of building a social fabric of peace and harmony.

From our discussions so far, we can conclude that the family especially the African family while
trying to preserve its own essential values has already integrated itself into a ‘multicultural church where local solutions to pastoral problems and local formulation of doctrine and worship are favoured.’ The family, therefore, is the ‘sanctuary and a vital cell’ of the society and of the church.

The Future of the Church in Africa

Considering the fact that the church in North Africa which produced African Saints such as Perpetua, Cyprian and Augustine disappeared giving way to Islam, one could be right to ask the question, does the church in our present time in Africa has a future? This section deals with those events that highlight the expectations and hopes for a stronger and vibrant African church. Oduyoye (1997, p. 73) expresses these expectations thus:

In other words the church should be embracing the traditional African communal principles, enhancing those principles with good news of Jesus Christ and enabling caring communities to develop and thrive. The future church in Africa should become once more the vehicle of good news to the world. The future of the church in Africa is dependent on its ability to embark afresh on its mission to be Christ in Africa.

Oduyoye carefully chose these present continuous verbs: embarking, embracing, enabling, enhancing etc. in order to emphasize the urgency of the tasks that face the future church in Africa. Though some indigenization of African church is taking place, some mainline Christian churches are still deeply rooted in the principles and theologies of Western missionaries. The future church in Africa should pay heed to this call by Pope John Paul II when he said:

God’s salvific plan for Africa is at the origin of the growth of the church on the African continent. But since by Christ’s will the church is by her nature missionary, it follows that the church in Africa is itself to play an active role in God’s plan of salvation. For this reason I have often said that the church in African is a missionary church and a mission church (1995, p. 24).

As missionaries to her own missions, African church should embrace the traditional African communal principles. Some of these essential cultural values include: extended family system, communal life, the place of ancestors, sense of hospitality, use of proverbs etc. Many Western missionaries could only teach these cultural values theoretically, it falls on the Africans to put into practice these cultural values by integrating them in their teachings and by practising them with their whole lives. This is the way the church will remain rooted in the African culture. The African church of the future should strive to be financially self-reliant. The way many African countries depend on America and Europe for financial support, the same way African churches depend on their colonial missionaries for financial help. It is important to note that some of these financial supports come with conditions which restrict the African churches to certain limits of creativity, independence and freedom. For the church in Africa to have fruitful solid future, it must be self-reliant and truly inculturated. Like Christ who incarnated himself into the Jewish culture, African church should strive to incarnate Christ into African culture so that external forces could not uproot it as was the case of North Africa. Thus the sad experience of North Africa is unforgettable lesson to the future church in Africa. These expectations are rooted in the hope we have for the church that will be truly African church. Once again, Buhlmann’s analysis of hope and its significance to the future church in Africa stands copious:

Hope must not be identified with human wish (and plan) fulfilment. By its nature hope is bound up with dramatic, disturbing phases in the development of history. If hope ceased to be the hidden meaning of a reality that is outwardly meaningless it would be in danger of falling to the level of rational thought and of dying. We are still, as we always have been, totally dependent on the incomprehensible mystery of God who reveals and conceals himself in history. Only when we can find no more answers to our questions, only when we have destroyed all the idols of our supposed answers, do we begin to have some inkling of what

The crux and import of the above quotation lies on this fact ‘only when we have destroyed all the idols of our supposed answers, do we begin to have some inkling of what God means. Then hope really begins.’ In other word, hope in God does not fail us as long as we divest ourselves from what Buhlmann calls, ‘the idols of our supposed answers. St Paul has a similar idea about hope when he advised the Romans in these words: “To hope is the way we are saved. But if we saw what we hoped for, there would be no longer hope: how can you hope for what is already seen? So we hope for what we do not see and we will receive it through patient hope” (Rom 8:24-25).

The future of the church in Africa directs our minds to think about what should be done to make the church in Africa become well rooted in African culture—the church that will help African to be Christ-like in the hope of eternal salvation for those who believe. Our hope of the future church in Africa is the church that is truly African where Christ is truly incarnated in African culture; an inculturated church that is in union with the universal church and a church that is missionary to its missions where faith in Christ is deeply rooted.

The Church in Africa and Inculturation

Our previous discussions examined the various attempts Christianity made to establish itself in African soil. The first two attempts were futile and unsuccessful because Christianity established that time did not take deep root in African soil. On the other hand, the present Christianity has some prospects of existence and survival if it is deeply rooted in African soil. This section, therefore, examines those prospects that will help the church in Africa to remain solid, stable and deeply rooted in African soil. In other words, this section focuses on ‘inculuration’ in African church. Before we continue this discussion a brief explanation of the meaning of inculturation is necessary. It is interesting to note that some terminologies have been associated with inculturation such as: acculturation, adaptation, contextualization, enculturation, indigenization and incarnation. Of all these terminologies, the closest to inculturation and which is most appropriate in this article is ‘Incarnation.’ This discussion begins with a synopsis of the word incarnation as it relates to this article. The word incarnation has its origin in John 1:14 which says: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ Reflecting on the word Incarnation, Sipuka (2000, p. 241) gives this beautiful illustration:

Through Incarnation, God in Jesus Christ was able to exist, act and speak in human form. The event; according to the Christian faith, took place in history at a particular place, that is Palestine and in a particular culture, that is Jewish culture. Jesus weaved himself into the culture of the Jews and through it communicated, ritualized and effected the salvation he had brought.

This is exactly what we expect to take place in African culture where Christ could weave himself into the African culture where he will become one with the Africans in their culture. The possible means through which Christ incarnates himself into African culture is inculturation. Few definitions of inculturation are examined below beginning with Arrupe (1990) who said:

Inculuration is the Incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’

Central in this definition is on the Incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context. In other words, as Jesus incarnated himself into the Jewish culture, the same way a true follower of Christ in Nigeria for example should incarnate himself/herself in the Nigerian culture transformed by the gospel. The Christian message here is the Good News of the Gospel of Christ which interacts with the Nigerian, Zairian, Zambian Kenyan culture to
transform it in order to bring about a new creation in Christ as St Paul said in 2Cor 5:17, “For that same reason, whoever that is in Christ has become a new creature…” Waliggo et al situates inculturation in a proper cultural context in these words:

It is the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his message of salvation evermore understood by people of every culture, locality and time. It means the reformation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought patterns of each people. It is the conviction that Christ and his Good News are even dynamic and challenging to all times and cultures as they become better understood and lived by each people. It is the continuous endeavour to make Christianity truly ‘feel at home’ in the culture of each people (1986, p. 12).

This definition gives us a sustaining version that makes inculturation authentic and real. That is, it must be an honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his message of salvation to be well understood and planted in the lives of the people. It should not be a word of mouth without transformative action. When Africans understand Christ and his message of salvation, they are transformed whereby they give themselves completely to Christ a submission that helps them defend their faith to the point of death. This is possible only when they hear the Word of God in their language; experience Christ in their cultural elements, then they appreciate Christ who has become an African to them. For inculturation to be successful it must be down to earth, it must be practical, it must be appealing to the people and it must be transformative. Below are some areas where inculturation has taken place: Using local language example, celebrating the Eucharist in the native language, translating the bible into the local language, using traditional instruments at the celebration of the Eucharist, using native music and dance at Eucharistic celebrations, witnessing traditional and church weddings the same day and others. Some areas that have not been inculturated are: the use of African staple food at the celebration of Mass, proper invocation of African ancestors etc. One major challenge in the life of Christians of different denominations is the faith they have in Christianity but in times of troubles and spiritual crises, they turn to traditional religion for the solution of these problems. Each time they are in such situations, they quote out of context this biblical passage, Matthew 22:21, which says: ‘Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.’ The church in Africa has an uphill task to formulate an inculturation that will tackle this challenge adequately. As Christianity is practised now in Africa, there is no proper cohesion and full integration in the spiritual life of many African Christians. A solution to this problem means that the Christianity in Africa is becoming ‘truly African and the members truly Christians.’

In his own contribution, Magesa (2004, p. 159 has this to say:

The only goal of the gospel-culture encounter is to help the African people and the African church to come ever closer to God. More concretely, the goal is to help all African Christians and, indeed, all African peoples, to lead an integrated spirituality. This is liberation, which means that no aspect of life at the physical, psychological, spiritual, institutional or moral level alienates the person.

Indeed, in African traditional religion, there is no dichotomy between religion and other aspects in the life of African traditionalist and worshipper. The inculturation that will achieve this purpose will appreciate African culture and integrate it seamlessly into the Christian message. When Christianity and African culture blend together, there is no alienation instead there is new creation. Standing on this solid footing, the Church in Africa becomes truly the family of God’s people.

Conclusion

This article discussed salient sub-headings that helped to bring about a proper understanding of the church as a family of God’s people. For example the meaning and origin of the church were explained and the importance of African family highlighted. Events in the past led to many questions why the first two attempts of Christianity failed to survive in North Africa.
The article plumed into these events resulting to the use of historical method. Thus, it dealt into historical analysis so as to explore the various ways the church could discover the Africanness in the African culture in order to use these good qualities and values to build a deeply rooted church in Africa. In the development of the article, the term inculturation came very strongly to the fore and this was well analysed and discussed. It was discovered that the future church in African should not only recognize the importance of inculturation but also become rooted in it using the incarnation model of Jesus who incarnated himself into the Jewish culture. African culture is very pivotal in this inculturation model and process because Africa has many rich cultural heritages. The interaction between the gospel and the African culture will bring about the desired African church made up of convinced faithful members of God’s family in the model of extended family system in Africa.

References
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