July 2017

Contested Moral Issues in Contemporary African Catholicism: Theological Proposals for a Hermeneutics of Multiplicity and Inclusion

Stan Chu Ilo

DePaul University, silo@depaul.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc>

Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Near and Middle Eastern Studies Commons](#), [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Regional Sociology Commons](#), [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [Sociology of Culture Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chu Ilo, Stan (2017) "Contested Moral Issues in Contemporary African Catholicism: Theological Proposals for a Hermeneutics of Multiplicity and Inclusion," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 4. p.50-73.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1015

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol1/iss2/4>

STAN CHU ILO

Contested Moral Issues in Contemporary African Catholicism: Theological Proposals for a Hermeneutics of Multiplicity and Inclusion

Stan Chu Ilo has two doctoral degrees, one in theology and another in sociology of education. He is presently a research professor at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University, Chicago, where he coordinates the African Catholicism Project. He is the author and editor of several books including, *The Church and Development in Africa*, *The Face of Africa*, and *In Search of Abundant Life: Wealth, Health and Hope in African Religions*. His forthcoming book with Orbis Books is titled *Illuminative Ecclesiology for a Wounded World: Pope Francis and the Praxis of a Poor and Merciful Church*.

INTRODUCTION

There are three tasks which I wish to accomplish in this chapter. The first is to set the context of my presentation within the overall goal of the current challenges facing African Catholicism in developing its own specific approaches to some of the contested moral questions of the day since the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*. Since the election of Pope Francis, many African Catholic theologians have been meeting in Nairobi under the aegis of the Theological Colloquium on Church, Religion, and Society (TCCRSA) under the leadership of Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator.¹ We came together from different parts of Africa as a community of theologians, pastors, and pastoral agents to collectively seek new pathways for African theologies through conversations with one another in the context of the history of our continent and the challenges facing the Church in Africa in our times. Our conversations were inspired by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and the two African synods as well as the emerging paradigm shift in world Catholicism through the ministry of Pope Francis. In this light, I will discuss the contested moral questions or the so-called untouchable issues in African Catholicism using the hermeneutics of history offered by Vatican II and *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG). The second task for me is to highlight some of the emerging moral and doctrinal issues facing African Catholicism in the light of the discussions, debates, and propositions of the two synods on the family (October 2014 and 2015). Third, I will propose how a hermeneutic of multiplicity and inclusion could help hold in balance the tension between tradition and innovation, universal principles and specific contextual application in responding to these new questions in a healthier and more harmonious dialogue.

CONTESTED MORAL ISSUES: BETWEEN CULTURAL PLURALISM AND MORAL RELATIVISM

Moral issues are always contested, because they deal with conflicting claims about objective moral truths and the ultimate purpose of the moral demand. In addition, moral questions deal with the autonomy of the individual conscience, the preserva-

¹ One of the most important outcomes of the three-year meeting was the publication of *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016.

tion and promotion of the common good through the daily choices of individuals, and the limitations of human freedom and human willing of the good proposed by the intellect. The scriptural account which I find helpful in understanding the complex nature of human freedom at the heart of moral contestations is Paul's account in Romans 7:18-20 (NIV) on the complexity of discerning the good and making moral judgement. Paul writes: "For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it." In this short text, St. Paul points at

- (i) the weakness of the human will in executing sound moral judgement when left on its own. Even though we can perceive the good through our conscience which is the inner judge and compass in discerning and seeking the good, and even though God's grace helps us to come to the full knowledge of the good and to execute sound moral judgement, this is not always the case in reality, because
- (ii) we live in a sinful world where we are constantly tempted and torn apart by the allurements of sin and other apparent goods, as a result of which Paul notes that
- (iii) we do not always perceive the good clearly nor do our actions often correspond to the good which we perceive to be true and beautiful.

All aspects of any moral choice present the individual with a whole array of contending possibilities in need of clarity and certitude in order to move the will to choosing good and avoiding evil. But the reality of sin in the context of the logic of grace reveals even more clearly our human condition in its relation to the good. Because we live in a world characterized by imperfection, a perfect ethical template to which all individual choices must conform is never possible. The boundaries are shifting in a radical way, and the aura of the sacred which inspired obedience to divine positive laws—and their interpretations and applications in the moral and canonical codes of the Church—are losing their legitimating grounds at least in the eyes of those who are pushing for alternative lifestyles that are opposed to the

official teachings of the Church. This is even more challenging because of the complexity and diversity of cultures which offer us strong and multiple ethical, moral, and spiritual standpoints which are not easily translatable to a transcending global moral regime to which everyone must submit.

The rejection of absolute moral claims and the dissolution of communal moral boundaries on what is good and evil are among the dramas presaged by unpredictable features of social change in contemporary society. Religion and religiously grounded moral truths seem to be one of the greatest victims of this emerging pattern in society today. For instance, the moral universe which was controlled, particularly in the history of Christianity, by contending religious narratives that were validated through contending interpretations of passages of the Christian Bible in the Reformation are now being toppled. They are being rejected not simply by alternative readings of the Bible but also through appeals to the autonomy of the individual conscience and individual perception of identity.

Today, the idea of a “nomadic generation” can apply to modern civilization in its search for roots and a sure foundation for life and reality.² It is becoming increasingly evident that the hunger in the human heart for meaning; the search for identity by those who are on the margins; the universal quest for peace, security, abundant life, and the good of order are not being sufficiently met by the traditional answers given in the Church’s teaching and moral codes. The manner in which these teachings are presented, defended, validated, and justified in our theologies—or preaching and laws—are inadequate to meet the new questions coming from the margins. The image of God, spirituality, the moral universe, and the ultimate purpose of the human journey on earth—all of which are tied into the moral prescriptions and ethical moorings of our laws and pastoral care—are often remote, judgmental, and cast in terms of reward and punishment. We need to unmoor our morality from the image of a purely moralistic God and a rigorist church concerned about discipline and enforcement of a synchronist and burdensome moral regime. The Church today is called to mediate an image of a God in whom mercy and righteousness meet

2 See the discussion of David Kinnaman’s book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith*, in Barna Group, “Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials.”

and with whom love, healing, and restoration (Psalm 85:10) dance together. In this way, the Church can become an instrument through which all humanity will hear the loving voice of God who calls us always to embrace a new way of conceiving relationship through ongoing conversion. This new way of living beyond our self-defined options leads to a corresponding moral response to God's unstinting and creative love which meets the human vocation for infinite horizons through the creative and saving grace which it brings. This stimulates the transformation of the human person from darkness and selfishness into infinite springs of hope and renewal.

In meeting the challenges of the times, however, it is important to distinguish between moral relativism and cultural relativism. Moral relativism is when one makes his or her subjective perception of truth or reality as the criterion of truth and objectivity. Moral relativism occurs when one actually operates from a limited moral horizon often blurred by one's moral blinders which keep the individual or group from seeing the value of reality and ultimate good beyond one's self-defined and subjective notion of the good. At the same time, moral relativism leads one to deny any objective morality and to absolutize one's subjective experience of moral worth and the necessary choices which one is called to make to meet the requirements of moral good. This standpoint is to be rejected always, because it is not possible to construct a community without some common meaning³ about what we all embrace as models and standards of behavior to which all must aspire for the good of the community and the realization of the eschatological fruits of God's kingdom. Moral relativism is the thorny pathway to chaos and decay for any society.

Cultural relativism, on the other hand, refers to the unique narrative and interpretation of reality and the good of particular groups based on their histories and worldviews. This requires that we understand people, be immersed in their life stories, enter into the hidden cultural grammar which defines their world of meaning and

3 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 79. Lonergan writes of actual, formal, and potential dimensions of common meaning; for him, "common meaning is realized by decisions and choices, especially by permanent dedication, in the love that makes families, in the loyalty that makes states, in the faith that makes religions. Community coheres or divides, begins or ends, just where the common field of experience, common understanding, common judgement [sic], common commitments begin and end."

symbols in order to see them as they see themselves. It does not necessarily mean that one accepts a particular narrative but rather that one cannot engage cultural traditions without first understanding their stories and reality and the plausibility structure which shape their worldview. One has to embrace cultural relativism as a positive value in mission work as well as in pastoral ministry and in developing relevant pastoral theologies for ministering to God's people, especially those on the margins.

Cultural relativism is one incontestable justification for embracing cultural pluralism in a unified Catholic religion. Cultural relativism simply means that peoples and cultures differ in their cultural knowledge, cultural symbols, and cultural behavior with regard to how to order their lives as individuals and as communities in order to attain the good. Whereas the search for the good and the movement of the intellect towards the good is rooted in the very ontological constitution of every human being, the means for realizing this are dictated by cultural traditions. In other words, the principle of morality remains the same for all of humanity, but the practices of morality differ according to cultural traditions. Each culture carries the beauty of the seed of God's Word at its source. However, every cultural tradition of morality is constantly in need of healing and purification in the light of the Gospel. Respecting these traditions can only begin with trying to embrace cultural relativism which, in theological language, is an incarnational experience of the life and reality of the other person in such a way that one tastes this reality, is immersed in it, and can appreciate what is going on with that culture and the individuals who embrace it.

This is particularly important in Africa in the questions about polygamy, marriage in stages, divorce and separation and remarriage, the process of annulment of marriage, childless marriages, priestly celibacy, single womanhood, and same-sex orientation, among other issues today. African theologians, pastors, and church leaders must enter into the broken, wounded, and painful world of these brothers and sisters in order to accompany them to that future which God alone knows. Cultural relativism, a necessary dimension of cultural pluralism, must be embraced in addressing these challenges and in finding specific African approaches to them which

may not be the same as the answers or social experimentation being proposed in the West. In making this affirmation, one is not claiming that African answers are pristine or perfect, but rather that they are grounded in a rich cultural grammar and worldview which need to be understood and appreciated in the Catholic Church's search for answers to the new questions of the day. This was the motivation of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in their joint document to the Second Synod on the Family when they stated: "At the same time, many synod fathers insisted on a more positive approach to the richness of various religious experiences, without overlooking the inherent difficulties. In these different religious realities and in the great cultural diversity that characterizes countries, positive possibilities should be appreciated first, and then, on this basis, limitations and deficiencies should be evaluated."⁴ The challenge for African theologians today is to show that specific African answers to these emerging and contested questions are theologically and pastorally sufficient in offering a plausibility structure to Africans in their daily and existential realities and helping those on the margins in Africa to live fully and faithfully their vocation as children of God. This should be pursued in the spirit of the dialogue with culture and history started at Vatican II.

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF VATICAN II TO AFRICAN CATHOLICISM

The celebration of the 50th anniversary of Vatican II in Africa was marked with several meetings, conferences, and publications in the Church. The question continues to be raised as to what the theological significance of the Council is and how it has been received, rejected, implemented, and interpreted. Vatican II introduced a hermeneutics of multiplicity for reading not only Christian history but also world history. As Demont A. Lane rightly observes, "If there is a tension surrounding the reception of Vatican II and the proper interpretation of Vatican II, it is partly due to the fact that insufficient attention has been given to the development of a theology of dialogue, in particular to the hermeneutics that should inform the practice of dialogue."⁵ Vatican II began a dialogue with the world which, for

4 III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "*Relatio Synodi*," 34.

5 Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, 155.

African Christianity, must bear the reality of Africa's own unique history and social context. *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus* represent, at the continental level, Africa's articulation of how to live out the message of Vatican II.

Vatican II had wide-ranging ecclesiological, cultural, spiritual, theological, and pastoral impacts on African Christianity. It also gave new impetus and new directions to Church missionary activities in Africa and stimulated a greater commitment to the Church's social mission, particularly in the areas of Catholic education and Catholic social ministry in poverty eradication; hospital and health care provision; the promotion and protection of the rights of the human person, especially the poor and the vulnerable; and civil engagement in the search for good governance and the good of order on the continent.

Alfred Guy Bwidi Kitambala, in his important book *Les Évêques d'Afrique et Le Concile Vatican II*, outlines the following as the important aspects of Vatican II's reception in Africa: a renewal of both catechesis on the teaching of the Council and faith formation in general in Africa; the emergence and restructuring of national and regional episcopal conferences in the continent (eight such regional conferences were formed in Africa immediately after the Council); the reform of the liturgy; the emergence of lay organizations in Africa; and greater commitment to lay formation and the participation of the lay faithful in church liturgies.⁶ Furthermore, Vatican II inspired a renewal of religious life and ecumenical initiatives as well as interfaith dialogue between the Catholic Church and other churches and religions in Africa. It also led to an increase in missionary activities in Africa, the indigenization of mission in Africa, and the greater participation of Africans in

6 A good example of this was the introduction of the "Mokambi" lay ministry by Cardinal Malula and the growth of the small Christian communities in Africa. When Cardinal Malula introduced this ministry of the non-ordained in his diocese, at the diocesan synod organized to develop a pastoral plan in the then Zaire for implementing the decisions of the council, he said: "*Non seulement des raisons pratiques... mais aussi et surtout la théologie de Vatican II sur L'Eglise come peuple de Dieu et comme communion nous pousse et nous confirme dans cette option prioritaires. Nos volons que dans notre diocèse chaque paroisse et chaque œuvre soit portée solidairement par des prêtres, des religieux et des religieuses, en même temps que par de nombreux laïcs engages et, là où cela est utile, aussi par des ministres laïcs.*" Quoted in Kitambala, *Les Évêques d'Afrique et Le Concile Vatican II*, 424.

the governance of the universal Church.⁷ Another significant impact of Vatican II in Africa has been the gradual emergence of strong African theological traditions. The renewal of African liturgical, spiritual, and pastoral life was the result of the development of a distinctive and robust African theology. The late Archbishop of Ouagadougou, Cardinal Paul Zoungana who, with Cardinals Parra and Monreal, read the closing statements of Vatican II on December 8, 1965, captured this feeling among African bishops when he wrote:

The reform was and still is the occasion for intense collaboration. Africa is not seeking anything spectacular. Our preference is for a slow and progressive Africanization. We want to avoid anything that could trouble the Christian people, and experience has shown us the merits of serious studies as an indispensable prerequisite, for anthropological studies as well as theological and liturgical studies. Our work is really open-ended, but we seek to bring the faithful to meet Christ according to their African soul.⁸

As a result of Vatican II, there are four aspects of the renewal of African theology for which the African hierarchy and laity advocated and which are worth highlighting. The first is the emergence of academic theological departments in Africa; if there was an emerging African theology, it was because there were African Catholic academies where theological conversations, publications, and formation were taking place. These centers of theological formation were nourished by theological conversations at parish and diocesan levels and, in turn, helped to stimulate theological education and the dissemination of theological materials beyond the academy at the local levels. Thus, from one Catholic department of theology in Africa (in DRC) at the beginning of the Council, the number of Catholic theological academies began to grow, such that, by the time of the First African Synod (in

7 Kitambala, *Les Évêques d'Afrique et Le Concile Vatican II*, 407-458.

8 Quoted in Kitambala, *Les Évêques d'Afrique et Le Concile Vatican II*, 42 (my own translation). The original French reads as follows: "La réforme fut et demeure l'occasion d'un travail intense de collaboration. L'Afrique n'a pas cherché le spectaculaire. Notre préférence va à une africanisation lente et progressive. Nous voulons éviter tout ce qui bouleverserait le peuple chrétien et l'expérience nous a montré le bien-fondé d'études sérieuses comme préalable indispensable, études anthropologiques autant qu'études théologiques et liturgiques. Notre travail ne vise pas une fin, mais nous cherchons à amener les fidèles à rencontrer le Christ selon leur âme africaine."

1994), they were flourishing in Nairobi, Kampala, Yaoundé, Abidjan, Kalunda, Port Harcourt, Kipalapala, and Luanda.⁹

The other three aspects of theological development in Africa that came about as a result of Vatican II were identified by SECAM in its important document to the 1974 Fourth Synod of Bishops in Rome titled, “Promotion of Co-Responsibility in Evangelization and Encouragement of African Theological Research.” First, the African bishops expressed the joy that Africans have assumed responsibility for the liturgical, pastoral, ecclesial, and theological development of the Church in Africa in order to bring about a vibrant and relevant African Church. This requires, they argued, that the theologies being developed in Africa in the spirit of Vatican II be constructed “with constant reference to the life of our communities,” in such a way that they have the force to help Christian communities in Africa “to respond to the questions posed to them by their diverse historical contexts in the evolution of our communities.”¹⁰ Second, the African bishops expressed a wish that, in the spirit of Vatican II, there should be in Africa “a pluralism of theology in the unity of faith” which addresses the fundamental aspirations of African peoples. Third, the African bishops wanted a world Catholicism in which there will be recognition of diversity within the Catholicity of the Church in order to bring about dynamic local faith communities in Africa. This will require a theological foundation which can guide the Church in Africa such that Africans will not be strangers in the house of God.¹¹ The bishops’ document also recognized the uniqueness of the Church in Africa and her need for a contextual African-Catholic approach to all issues relating to the evangelization of peoples while giving voice to the African laity’s important contribution to catechesis, human and spiritual development of the continent, and the Church.

From a historical perspective, one would notice that, before the Council and immediately after, there was a strong ferment for African theologies among the laity

9 Tshibangu gives a good historical account of the development of African theology under the inspiration of Vatican II, especially between 1965 and the Second African Synod of 1994. See Tshibangu, “Le Mouvement Théologique Africain Depuis 1960,” 82-89.

10 For the full text of this important document, see Tshibangu, *Le Concile Vatican II et L'Eglise Africaine*, 131.

11 Ibid., 132.

and the hierarchy that culminated in the publication of SECAM's important 1974 document on co-responsibility. It is worth noting that one of the greatest conversations to have taken place in African Catholicism before and during the Council was the one inaugurated by a Muslim lay convert to Catholicism, Alioune Diop. Diop founded Société Africaine de Culture (SAC) and Présence Africaine, and he also coordinated L'Union Etudiants Africain Catholique.¹² When one looks at the three most important documents produced by Présence Africaine for SAC,¹³ one will observe the courage, dynamism, and creativity of these pioneers. They committed themselves to the development of diverse theological and cultural traditions in Africa and affirmed the need for theological pluralism in world Catholicism. They worked strenuously for the development of Africa's unique narrative of faith and morals, while advocating clear-sighted and innovative proposals for a truly inculturated African ecclesiology and pastoral plan. One undeniable fact from this history is the strong desire by Africans before, during, and immediately after the Council for African solutions to African problems in dialogue with and in fidelity to the unity of faith. This was well developed in SECAM's short but powerful message on co-responsibility in the Church. This theological enthusiasm and creativity in Africa were dampened through a centrist approach by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict which weakened theological development in Africa and contextual pastoral ministry on the part of bishops in Africa; nonetheless, there is a new impetus being given to the development of contextual theologies and pastoral plans under Pope Francis. This calls for a hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion as well as a new openness of the Church to the world, especially to those on the margins.

A HERMENEUTICS OF MULTIPLICITY AND INCLUSION IN WORLD CATHOLICISM

In the context of this essay, a hermeneutics of multiplicity means embracing a symphony of differences by including the voices of the historically voiceless and marginalized groups and cultures within the one Catholic family. It is an attitude

12 Cf. Kitambala, *Les Évêques d'Afrique et Le Concile Vatican II*, 118-123.

13 *L'Eglise à l'heure de L'Afrique, Motions sur le Concile que les Etudiants Catholiques Africaines* proposed at the VII Congress in Fribourg (April 13-17, 1962), and the colloquium organized in Rome the same year.

which nourishes an ecclesial openness to the surprises of the Holy Spirit and the continuing revelation of the meaning and dimensions of the Tradition and traditions of the Church in her earthly pilgrimage as the instrument of salvation to diverse peoples. This is the necessary consequence of cultural pluralism within the one communion of faith in world Catholicism, where we all learn from each other's experiences of joy and pain. This attitude rejects a monocultural Catholicism, or what Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp, Belgium, calls "a predominantly defensive and antithetical model"¹⁴ which is resistant to social change, cultural mediation, or differentiation of meaning in the one family of faith. A hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion calls on the Church to embrace what the Synod of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar calls "cultural alternatives whose values can have positive impacts on certain theories and alienating practices of contemporary cultures" and which offer "alternative pathways" to the values on morality, family life, etc., that are promoted through the Western media.¹⁵ In *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), Pope Francis writes:

Within the Church, countless issues are being studied and reflected upon with great freedom. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God's word. For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guided by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact, such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel.¹⁶

In EG 40-45, Pope Francis gives a clear definition of a hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion with regard to understanding, interpreting, and applying the Church's moral precepts to new questions. He makes three significant points which I wish to use in offering some concluding propositions:

14 Bonny, "Synod on the Family: Expectations of a Diocesan Bishop," 19.

15 Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), *The Future of the Family, Our Mission*, 21.

16 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), 40.

(1) A hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion means acceptance in the Church of “differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology, and pastoral practice” which are reconciled “by the spirit of respect and love” and which help the Church grow in her understanding and application of the “riches of God’s Word.” Pope Francis argues that the reason for a hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion is “today’s vast and rapid cultural changes” which demand that the Church seek new ways of expressing “unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness.”¹⁷ He points out that the Church, while holding on to “a holy intent of communicating the truth about God and humanity, sometimes give them [the faithful] a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian.” This is a serious contention which the Holy Father makes, reminding the Church and Christians of the danger of making absolute what is relative and making relative what is absolute in such a way that we obscure the substance of the Gospel which is the love of God whose cruciform witnessing is made credible in the Paschal Mystery.

(2) Drawing on Pope Francis, it follows that the hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion is a historical exigency, because the Church is a historical subject. As a result, the Church’s customs, precepts, and rules have deep historical roots¹⁸ which may no longer be as effective today as they were in the past in conveying the beauty of the Gospel. The Christian faith is not simply about rules but about the life and witness of Jesus Christ which becomes an exegesis of the law.¹⁹ There is the need, then, for proper discernment led by the Holy Spirit and for openness to embracing new ways of modelling the Christian life such that it captures the modern world’s cultural imagination and addresses the spiritual and moral hunger of many who are on the margins. According to Yves Congar, this will require finding a new way to “give truly spiritual meaning to acts that have become routine” and also to “adapt some of the forms of ecclesial life to the needs of new circumstances.”²⁰ For Congar, the “risk of growing old” and “becoming locked into habits, memories, and institutions”²¹ is always present in Christianity, and in order to maintain her spiritual

17 Francis, *EG*, 41.

18 *Ibid.*, 43.

19 *Ibid.*, 42.

20 Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church*, 134.

21 *Ibid.*, 135.

impulse the Church must find a way of freeing herself from becoming enslaved to “a fixed expression.”²² According to Congar, the church of Erasmus’s time suffered greatly, because “the pastoral had been overshadowed or effaced by the feudal, the Gospel spirit by the excrescences of flamboyant piety, faith by religion, and religion by practices.”²³

Being the products of history and the Church’s attempt to capture the ineffable mystery of the life of Christ and the revelation of God’s inner life, laws and regulations are limited in their ability to bring us closer to God. The Lineamenta on the First Synod on the Family was explicit about the need to begin afresh all our pastoral care and outreach to people:

In order to walk among contemporary challenges, the decisive condition is to maintain a fixed gaze on Jesus Christ, to pause in contemplation and in adoration of his Face. . . . Indeed, every time we return to the source of the Christian experience, new paths and undreamed of possibilities open up (Pope Francis, *Discourse*, October 4, 2014). Jesus looked upon the women and the men he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with patience and mercy, proclaiming the demands of the Kingdom of God.²⁴

Thus, the witness and narration of the life of the poor man of Galilee and the imitation of this life by the saints throughout the history of the Church offer more credible and compelling evidence of the value of the Christian faith. It is in the light of this evidence that Pope Francis proposes a Church of Mercy to accompany the faithful with patience at every step in their personal growth. In this light, the hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion is about how to include the narrative of each person in the narration of the great work of love and mercy which God is accomplishing in the Church. It is all about how the practices of faith communities embody diverse pastoral accompaniment that makes it possible for everyone to experience “the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love.”²⁵

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 139.

24 XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Lineamenta,” 11.

25 Francis, EG, 44.

(3) The third aspect of this hermeneutics in the section of EG under consideration concerns the Church that goes out like “a mother with an open heart,” a Church whose doors are open to everyone, every culture, saints and sinners, as well as those who are misunderstood.²⁶ An important aspect of this hermeneutic is the idea of growth in understanding the mystery that is very significant in the Church’s history and represented in the divine pedagogy given to the Church through many of the Church fathers. This mystery is the idea that God teaches each person and each phase of history in a unique way. What worked for the scholastics may not work for the “nomadic souls” of today. The spiritual practices of post-Reformation France may not be adequate to meet the challenges of immigration in the modern world, nor is the spirit of the Crusades adequate to meet the present-day challenge of Christian persecution. Pope Francis, therefore, proposes a missionary heart and open disposition which never “closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness. It realizes that it has to grow in its own understanding of the Gospel and in discerning the paths of the Spirit, and so it always does what good it can, even if in the process, its shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.”²⁷

In the light of the foregoing, there is an obvious need to develop a more contextual pastoral application of Catholic beliefs and practices as a result of the emergence of a world Church. *Indeed, the ideals of some versions of Catholicism which espouse medieval notions of human nature, normative faith, and orthodoxy, and mediate unchanging truths to a changing world, are being challenged even from the very heart of Catholicism, the Roman center.* In this emerging reality, Catholicism is slowly coming to the conclusion that the big questions of our times can no longer be answered through a single narrative, nor will the contemporary new realities be met simply by referring to one article in the Church’s catechism or canon law. Indeed, there seems to be a new realization that each generation of Catholics must dig deep into the forces of its history, privileging the resources of the present time and tapping into the rich Christian traditions of the past, aided by the Holy Spirit who leads the Church and her faithful into the fullness of truth in order to meet the new challenges of the present.

26 Ibid., 45-46.

27 Ibid., 45.

CONTESTED MORAL ISSUES IN AFRICAN CATHOLICISM: PRINCIPLES FOR PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Pastoral accompaniment has been described in many terms by Pope Francis—for example, the “art of accompaniment”,²⁸ taking on the “smell of the sheep”,²⁹ and “the revolution of tenderness.”³⁰ It is being a traveling companion for the faithful³¹ through an intimate closeness and connection at the deepest level of their faith and humanity in the questions, uncertainty, wounds, and hurts that life presents to them. It means being with people where they are and meeting their needs by mediating God’s grace to them at those points where our human fragility is in dire need of divine love. It is the pastoral equivalent of embracing cultural relativism. Adopting this attitude and disposition, all Christians and especially church leaders will recognize that, when we meet any human person, we are standing on holy ground. And, hence, there is a need for a hermeneutics of humility and diversity in seeing the expanded field view which God always opens to us as we approach the margins. It is an incarnational presence of total identification which not only challenges the Church to have face-to-face encounters with the people of God but also to walk in their shoes, embrace their stories, and allow those stories—especially of those who suffer—to become the new presence of God’s Word in our midst. There are many people waiting at the doors of the Church to receive God’s love and mercy, and the Church is called to become a mother with an open heart and a willing, accepting hand to bring them home. The Church in Africa can do this in several ways by remembering that it isn’t a battle between the West and Africa; going beyond a restrictive interpretation and application of natural law; and being prophets of a new creation.

REMEMBER THAT IT IS NOT A BATTLE BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE WEST

Most of the African bishops’ statements have been framed in dialectical terms as

28 Ibid., 169.

29 Ibid., 24.

30 Ibid., 88.

31 Forte, *The Church*, 76.

a reaction to Western cultural influence.³² They are also built on the idea of a cultural homogeneity among Africans on some of the contested moral questions. The questions and challenges specific to the African context have not been adequately addressed by the Church in Africa. A typical example is the specific questions facing African families—questions which were totally neglected at the synod because of the Western Church's concern to focus on same-sex relations and communion for divorced and separated Catholics. These problems are very real and pressing in the West, but they are not central to the life of families and Christian communities in Africa. What are central, however, in the African context are three very pressing problems which the SECAM document clearly identifies,³³ namely: (1) What should be the appropriate pastoral action in African Catholicism for “polygamous converts, who desire to receive the sacraments of Christian initiation?” (2) How can African Catholicism embrace marriage in stages and allow for “certain conjugal properties even before effective and valid celebration of marriage”?³⁴ (3) How can the rites and rituals associated with marriage in African Christianity be inculturated, so that African couples will no longer be celebrating three marriage rituals (as Cardinal Malula pointed out many years ago)—traditional African marriage, church marriage, and the certification of the marriage by the state? How will the Church in Africa address the annulment of monogamous marriages validly contracted by Catholic couples in Africa in terms of traditional laws on inheritance and the status of the children and protection of women through adequate alimony? How will the Church in Africa address the practice of asking polygamists who join the Church to choose one of their wives for sacramental marriage in the Church? In both instances, the Church may actually be violating African cultural values of the indissolubility of marriage. As it stands today in canon law, annulment does

32 For instance, see SECAM, *The Future of the Family, Our Mission*, 20, where the African bishops assert that “the dominant (Western) cultures are also strong and subtly introducing theories and practices contrary to the fundamental values of marriage and family and the idolatry of money.” It seems that African theological and moral conversations are often carried out as a reaction to Western currents. Paulinus Odozor corroborated this when he pointed out that, at the Second African Synod, one of the concerns raised for which an African response was formulated was “the toxic elements or viruses that were being foisted on Africa from foreign sources.” See Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African*, 290.

33 SECAM, *The Future of the Family, Our Mission*, 41.

34 Ibid., 43.

not sufficiently address Africa's cultural values with regard to the process, conditions, and terms for divorce should a marriage fail, nor does it sufficiently address the rights of women and children from the failed marriage. In this regard, African bishops propose that

the dynamic character, values, and expectations of the African culture of marriage, should be taken into account for the canonical recognition and validity of the marriage in Africa, as it was the case in the West when Pope Alexander took over the position of the Latin and the German to link validity and indissolubility of Christian marriage to the exchange of consent and consummation.³⁵

The same disposition should be applied by the African Church to address some of the challenges it faces today in areas like celibacy, clerical sexual abuse, homosexuality, the therapeutic use of condoms in the fight against diseases like HIV/AIDS, and the challenge of childless marriages as well as single women who often do not have a sense of identity or patrimony in their parents' home. In all these instances, the African Church's challenge is to engage these issues with honesty and transparency, rather than sweep them under the rug. Pastoral accompaniment means creative solutions and approaches to the new questions that arise. Thus, the reiteration of the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the properties of family or on compulsory celibacy does not, in itself, translate into a pastoral praxis built on pastoral accompaniment. There is a need to develop a deeper and stronger theological and historical analysis beyond the restatement of the Church's position. There is also a need for new forms of doctrinal activism, either on the part of church bishops or a romanticized notion of Church teaching, as if these were formulated and received without cultural mediation in part or as a whole.

GO BEYOND A RESTRICTIVE INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION OF THE NATURAL LAW THEORY

In 2009, the International Theological Commission published an important document, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, in which

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

the theologians make this suggestion: “Natural law could not, therefore, be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves a priori on the moral subject; rather it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making a decision.”³⁶ Thus, the constant appeal to natural law needs to be developed further by African theologians to help our bishops to appreciate the larger and broader context of applying the principles of natural law. Benezet Bujo’s work in this area needs to be highlighted, specifically, his argument against the universalizing and limiting interpretations of some versions of natural law in Thomism since Pope Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris*.³⁷ For Aquinas, natural law is “the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature.” He argues further that it is “the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil” and this light is “an imprint on us of the Divine light.”³⁸ These inclinations are common to all human beings, and even irrational animals participate in their own way, according to Aquinas, in this Eternal reason.³⁹ For human beings, however, the participation relates to both rational and intellectual grasping of the true, the good, and the beautiful and willingness to attain the end proper to the person. For Aquinas, natural law specifies both the origin of our acts (in human nature) and the goal of our acts (the ordination of human acts to the proper end of human life). In this light, every human act is properly directed to a specific end which conduces to the essence and the vocation of the human person and is a participation in the

36 International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic*, 59.

37 Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 19. Here, after giving examples of the restrictive application of natural law theory in intercultural morality—especially in African Christianity on issues like marriage, masturbation, and equality of the sexes, Bujo proposes: “In my view, the examples presented here make it clear that the dialogue between ecclesiastical moral theology, based on natural law, and African moral theology, based on the community, would be made easier if the Church paid more heed to the Thomistic distinction between *ius naturale* and *ius gentium*.” Paulinus Odozor has argued against Bujo’s position, noting that “Bujo’s presentation on the role of African communities and cultures in the search for moral truth is a bit one-sided, because it idealizes Africa’s past and does not sufficiently take into account the limitations within African traditions and their dynamic character.” While emphasizing the importance of natural law for establishing universal norms and objective moral standards, Odozor also questions Bujo’s absolutization of the process of discursive communal discernment, by making an end what should be a means and thus, leading to a slippery slope which could lead to utilitarian relativism. See Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African*, 158-165 and 237-240.

38 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae (ST)*, 1a-11ab, q. 91, a. 2, 1.

39 Ibid., 1-11, 91, 2, 3.

Eternal law. These natural inclinations, for Aquinas,⁴⁰ include the inclination to do good and avoid evil, to preserve and develop one's existence; the inclination to procreate in order to survive and sustain the species through reproduction; and the inclination (specific to human beings as rational and spiritual beings) to desire the truth, to embrace the truth and to enter into relationships with God, fellow human beings, and the world of nature. Linked to this is the inclination to live in a healthy and well-functioning society where the ultimate good of every human person is promoted, protected, and preserved.

I will argue that Aquinas's account of natural law has a dynamic quality rather than the static interpretation and appropriations which are often invoked in response to moral contestations in our times. I will point to a few indications showing that Aquinas makes a distinction between universal principles and particular contexts and that this distinction leaves room for a diversity of applications. For instance, in the fourth article in Question 94, he argues this way: "but in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles: and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all." He gives a few examples where such can happen. However, in article five, he argues that "a change in natural law may be understood in two ways. First, by way of addition. In this sense, *nothing hinders the natural law from being changed: since many things for the benefit of human life have been added over and above the natural law, both by the Divine law and by human laws.*"⁴¹ Here, Aquinas points to two kinds of changes: one a positive change in natural law "supplying what is wanting in natural law," or a second that is a negative change which is "the perversion of natural law in the hearts of men as to certain matters." While time and space do not allow me to go into greater details here, the point I wish to make is about the dynamic interpretation of natural law in Aquinas and the need to always discern what is positive or negative within the social changes that surround us. Discernment requires that theologians, teachers, and pastors enter into the chaos of the lives of our modern world's "nomadic souls" to accompany them in what they are experiencing in the ceaseless search for meaning and for a true home.

40 Ibid., 1-11, 96, 2, 1.

41 Ibid., 1-11, 94, 1, 5, 1. Emphasis mine.

In Aquinas' thought, natural law is open, like the text of the scriptures, to multiple interpretations and practical applications.⁴² However, there is always a standard to measure normativity of human actions: divine revelation of the ultimate purpose of the moral demand. This reveals to the faith community to what extent the pastoral application or expansion of the natural law could help it faithfully fulfill the mission of bringing the good news to people in their different stages of life.

BE PROPHETS OF A NEW CREATION

Pope Francis is reminding us today that what we need is not simply the reaffirmation of doctrine but a new engagement with history in the spirit of Vatican II. *It is so easy to reaffirm what we have always professed, to profess what we have always believed, and to defend what we have always lived. It is too easy also to live off the fruits of other people's teaching and doctrinal formulations.* The most difficult theological and pastoral task is to take a step into a place where we have never gone before and, in these uncharted territories, to engage and be open to new moments of revelation dictated by the movement of the Spirit in history. This is the call of the prophets. This will require creativity and courage, as well as some form of experimentation and the taking of measured steps into the unknown with the help of the Holy Spirit. *The times seem appropriate for the emergence of new prophets in world Catholicism who will lift our gaze beyond the imprisoning certainties about the things we do not know and beyond the pride of an ecclesial mindset which seeks to provide definitive answers to indefinite questions and mysteries that define what it means to be human in an infinitely boundless cosmos.* The Catholic challenge today is for a new Catholic imagination and creative appropriation of the treasures of the Church to meet the needs of the times. I think Pope Francis is such a prophet. He is showing that it is

42 Aquinas admits that the literal sense could have multiple meanings: "since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy writ is God, who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, is not fitting, as Augustine says (Confess. Xii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses." (ST 1,1,10). Why would one word have many senses? Thomas Prügl argues that, here, one can see Aquinas's admission of the possibility of multiple understandings of the same revealed truth as long as there is no admission of falsehood in scripture and insofar as the two understandings do not contradict each other, as Aquinas argues in *De Pot.* Q. 4, a. 1, "every truth which without violating the wording, is able to be fitted to divine scripture is its sense." Quoted in Prügl, "Thomas Aquinas as Interpreter of Scripture," 396.

possible for Catholicism to find within her bosom a new way of being church and new pathways for meeting our contemporary challenges in fidelity to the God of surprises and renewal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. “*Relatio Synodi*: The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization.” Vatican City: 2014. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html.
- XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. “Lineamenta: The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World.” Vatican City: 2014. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.html.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. New York: Benziger Bros., 1947.
- Barna Group. “Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials: Research Releases in ‘Millennials and Generations.’” June 3, 2013. <https://www.barna.com/research/three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials>.
- Bonny, Johan. “Synod on the Family: Expectations of a Diocesan Bishop.” Translated by Brian Doyle. September 1, 2014. <http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/SYNOD-ON-FAMILY-ENG.pdf>.
- Bujo, Bénédet. *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*. Translated by Brian McNeil. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001.
- Congar, Yves. *True and False Reform in the Church*. Translated by Paul Philibert. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011.
- Francis, Pope. *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*. Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.
- Forte, Bruno. *The Church: The Icon of the Trinity—A Brief Study*. Translated by Robert Paolucci. Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1991.

International Theological Commission. *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*. London: Catholic Truth Society, 2012. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html.

Kitambala, Alfred Guy Bwidi. *Les Évêques d'Afrique et Le Concile Vatican II*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010.

Lane, Dermot A. *Stepping Stones to Other Religions: A Christian Theology of Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011.

Loneragan, Bernard. *Method in Theology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.

Odozor, Paulinus. *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological and Theological Considerations*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014.

Prügl, Thomas. "Thomas Aquinas as Interpreter of Scripture." In *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow, 386-415. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.

Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). *The Future of the Family, Our Mission: Contribution to the 14th General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Family*. Accra, Ghana: SECAM-SCEAM Publications, 2015.

Tshibangu, Tharcisse T. "Le Mouvement Theologique Africain Depuis 1960." In *Le Concile Vatican II et L'Eglise Africaine: Mise en Oeuvre du Concile dans L'Eglise d'Afrique (1960-2010)*, edited by Tharcisse T. Tshibangu, 82-89. Kinshasa, DRC: Editions L'Epiphanie, 2012.