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Perspectives and Trends in Contemporary African Ecclesiology

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"Born old about a hundred years ago, the African church resembles the Jesus of the Byzantine icons, whose child body has the face of a grown man. Its face will only lose its lines in the fountain of youth which is the future, passage through which implies death to a past of borrowing and a responsibility".

INTRODUCTION

The African church personified above is fledgling. Strangely enough, for some African ecclesiologists, this church, albeit only a century old, "already shows signs of obsolescence"². It is saddled with a checkered history of an inherited antiquated ecclesial structure, confronted with a present reality of faith, culture and society in precipitated mutations, and a future of complex possibilities at once promising and petrifying. Its growth is a lurch towards maturity, but not a maturity defined and measured in legalistic canonical terms, merely making of it a "fully-equipped branch of the Roman communion"³. Rather, the goal of this process of maturation is the emergence of an African church that is a full-fledged community of faith adapted to the circumstances of its time and place.

¹ SIDBE SEMPORÉ, "The Churches in Africa Between Past and Future", in CLAUDE GEFFRÉ and BERTRAND LUNEAU (eds.), *The Churches of Africa: Future Prospects* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 11.

² JEAN-MARC ELA, *My Faith as an African* trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, New York/London: Orbis/Chapman, 1988), 3. See also, ELA, *Le Cri de l'Homme Africain* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980), 132.

³ MICHAEL SINGLETON, "A Changing Church in a Changing Continent", in GEFFRÉ and LUNEAU, *Op. Cit.*, 23.

Presently, it is possible to talk of an African church in full bloom. Uncontroverted statistical data indicate the mushrooming of churches and ecclesial bodies all over the continent. The Catholic Church is not left out. Evidence abounds of its numerical growth, which perhaps is its "most striking characteristic"⁴, and a burgeoning of intense missionary enterprise, sustained by the active effort of indigenous clergy and pastoral agents. The question is: What is this African church? Is there a systematically elaborated *theological* conception of its origin, nature, mission and meaning in terms which are peculiar to and expressive of the African way of being church? Briefly stated: Is there an African ecclesiology?

Many a theologian will respond in the negative to the questions posed above. The reason for this kind of response is not far-fetched: the African church is still a fledgling reality. Therefore, any attempt to systematically elaborate a theological reflection on its nature cannot but — at this stage — remain elementary; and one should not expect that such a reflection would be comparable in depth and amplitude to the ecclesiology of the western church.

My sole aim in this essay is to effect a brief survey of some literature in which African ecclesiologists attempt to delineate the content and extent of an African ecclesiology. The title of this essay could very well be "*What are they saying about African ecclesiology?*" Precisely, it purposes to consider briefly those salient features which are discernible in the various proposals relating to the African conception of the church.

1. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

To many a theologian this question appears passé, especially when considered from the viewpoint of the already systematized western conception and understanding of the church. More aptly framed, the question is: To the African, what is the church? Expectedly, the answer to this question has to be formulated in an *African way*, because although the origin of the church can be traced dynamically back to the

⁴ ELA, *My Faith.*, 138; cf. also J. - M. ELA and RENÉ LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps des Héritiers* (Paris: Karthala, 1981), 114 ff.

life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this latter did not elaborate the definitive "form or structure that *Ecclesia* would take"⁵. The implication of this, in the understanding of African ecclesialogists, is that the shape and structure of the church is to be creatively imagined and invented, taking into account authentic African values⁶. Three basic elements seem to define the African understanding of the church: community, family and ancestors.

1.1. *Community*

The African notion and experience of community aptly embodies the meaning of church. For Africans, community is what Ela designated as "être ensemble", that is, "une caractéristique de la vie selon l'Évangile"⁷. Community creates the context in which African belief systems are formulated and lived as communion by all its members. As a fundamental structure of African spirituality, it facilitates participation, fellowship, and personal and interpersonal relationship from which no one is excluded⁸.

In Africa, community is a communion of purpose. Its needs and goals are recognized and pursued through a harmony of diverse efforts. This is not to suggest that it is a closed inwardlooking entity. Essentially, it is open to other communities, as depicted, for example, by the practice of exogamous marriages. Concerning the question of participation, to which I shall return later, it is never the exclusive

⁵ DOUGLAS W. WARUTA, "Towards an African Church", in JESSE N. K. MUGAMBI and LAURENTI MAGESA (eds.), *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology* (Nairobi: Innovative Publishers, 1990), 31; see also EFOÉ-JULIEN PÉNOUKOU, *Églises d'Afrique: Propositions pour l'Avenir* (Paris: Karthala, 1984), 158-159.

⁶ Cf. JEAN-MARC ELA, "Ecclesial Ministry and the Young Churches", in GEFFRÉ and LUNEAU, *Op. Cit.*, 48; SINGLETON, "A Changing Church..." 22; PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 21, 30, 40, 156.

⁷ ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps.*, 167 ff. See also JOHN MARY WALIGGO, "The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church", in MUGAMBI and MAGESA, *Op. Cit.*, 117.

⁸ Cf. ZABLON J. NTHAMBURI, "Ecclesiology of African Independent Churches", in MUGAMBI and MAGESA, *Op. Cit.*, 44-45; WALIGGO, "The African Clan..." 124; WARUTA, "Towards an African Church" 37.

preserve of the leader of the community, but a vocation addressed and open to all its members.

Already one can glimpse the insights and possibilities which the African understanding of community proffers for an enriching notion of church. From an African perspective this latter is a community of faith where the presence of God is experienced "not through some documents or traditions but in the context of (...) community life and existential realities, with little regard or references to external validating authorities"⁹.

It is in this sense that Ela's insight on the community as a sacrament is to be understood. For him, the church is a community in and around which men and women "are called to live out the values of the Kingdom... gospel communities where men and women take charge of their lives and their future"¹⁰.

1.2. *Extended Family*

The notion of church as a community is further concretized in another distinctively African value: the extended family. The consensus of African ecclesialogists is that this value is not only sociologically and anthropologically constitutive of the African mentality, but also is an integral component of African spirituality. Simply stated, the African is open to a sense of family. It is in the family that the African experience of God is given an *immediate* expression; where the qualities of openness, solidarity and hospitality are palpable, and differences are celebrated and reconciled.

Pénoukou emphasizes the relevance of this African value to the understanding of the church, and its connection to the expression of faith: "*La croyance à une divinité a toujours été chez nous une 'affaire familiale', un patrimoine ancestral, qui servait à former la conscience d'appartenance solidaire à l'ensemble du groupe; elle apparaissait ainsi comme facteur de cohésion sociale*"¹¹. To affirm that faith is a *family affair* is not

⁹ WARUTA, "Towards an African Church", 37.

¹⁰ ELA, *My Faith*, 7 ff.

¹¹ PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 110.

to suggest a conformist adhesion to God, where there is no room for diversity of approaches. On the contrary, diversity is fostered in the family (of faith) as a gift aimed at its overall growth and well-being.

The potentials of this family paradigm for the African conception and experience of the church are still to be fully plumbed by African ecclesialogists. But already some conclude, with reason, that: "The Church characterized the African concept of the extended family life... a participatory community where discipline, self-control and tolerance make it possible for all members to work together for the Kingdom of God"¹². Furthermore, it is in the light of this realization that the African Synod adopted *church-as-family* as the model of church in Africa¹³. As it is, a model is not a complete set, it is a reduced scale whose practical and full components still need to be developed. One possible objection that might be urged against this choice of model is the glaring fact that the very notion of family is assailed by many contemporary societal ills. So, why choose this model at a time when its very existence is most threatened? In a certain sense, the kind of family envisaged here is not a reality. In my opinion, this choice of model appears in real terms as a challenge; it challenges the Africans to assume the responsibility of building a church that is truly the family of God.

To say that the church is the family of God in Africa serves as a corrective to one of the defects of the family model, that is, particularism of relationship. As family of God, the bond of relationship in the church is universal, neither particular nor exclusive. Here a properly understood trinitarian theology can serve to eliminate the particularistic tendency of the family. God is, first, a community of the Creator of one great human family to which we all belong. This human family is redeemed by Jesus Christ who, through the Paschal

¹² NTHAMBURI, "Ecclesiology of African Independent Churches", 45; cf. 53; WALIGGO, "The African Clan...", 118.

¹³ Space will not allow a full elaboration of this model as proposed by the African Synod. I treat of this in greater detail in my article, "The Church in Dialogue as the Family of God", in CECIL MCGARRY, S. J., (ed.), *What Happened at the African Synod?* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1995), 33-50. See also JOHN PAUL II, *The Church in Africa: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1995).

Mystery, has pulled down the dividing wall of separation: division of race, tribe, clan, social class, etc. Through the Son the Father pours out the Spirit on all believers, making them all children of one family. Conceived in such terms the potentials of this model are indispensable in the vital quest for the emergence of a truly familial African ecclesiology.

1.3. Ancestors

An African ecclesiology is inconceivable without the concept of ancestorship. The organization of an African community, clan or family pivots on the cult of the ancestors, the living-dead, whose basic signs "influence and envelop the lives of Africans, constantly recalling the presence of the ancestors in the warp and woof of their existence"¹⁴. The implication of this notion for African ecclesiology is amply manifest in the work of Bénézet Bujo and Charles Nyamiti.

The starting point of Bujo's and Nyamiti's ecclesiologies is their respective christologies. In the former's *proto-ancestral christology*, Christ is *Proto-ancestor par excellence*¹⁵, while in the latter's *ancestral christology*, Christ is *Brother-ancestor par excellence*¹⁶. Undoubtedly, there is a direct link between christology and ecclesiology. Any particular view of the nature and vocation of the church is always grounded on the understanding of Christ¹⁷. Understandably, Bujo's and Nyamiti's ecclesiologies are an extension of their christologies.

In Bujo's *proto-ancestral ecclesiology*, Christ is "the founder of a new community, the community of faith"¹⁸. Basically, this means that Christ is the proto-ancestor who

¹⁴ ELA, *My Faith*, 14. Ela's description and analysis of the cult of the ancestors among the peoples of Northern Cameroon (*My Faith*, 13 ff) — though not directly in relation to ecclesiology — is perhaps the most lucid and balanced study available of this subject. See also GWINYAI H. MUZOREWA, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1985), 11-15; PETER J. PARIS, *The Spirituality of African Peoples* (Minneapolis: Forstress Press, 1995), 51-58.

¹⁵ BÉNÉZET BUJO, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Nairobi: St Paul Publications-Africa, 1992), 75-92.

¹⁶ CHARLES NYAMITI, *Christ as our Ancestor* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Cf. PETER SCHINELLER, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990), 49.

¹⁸ BUJO, *Op. Cit.*, 92.

communicates "life-force" to all the descendants of the community of faith in the form of the Eucharist (proto-ancestral meal), which constitutes the authentic foundation of a truly African church. Central to this ecclesiology is the notion of life which the community of faith is invited to offer to all its members¹⁹. As Ela rightly maintains, this idea of the Eucharist as a proto-ancestral meal *of life* is of capital importance to African men and women who are in perpetual "quête de vie"²⁰; who agonize daily "over where their next meal is coming from"²¹.

In Nyamiti's *ancestral-koinonia ecclesiology*, "the Church is the continuation of the mystery of Christ in human communities, the Church is destined to be the medium and organ of Christ's ancestorship to humankind"²². Ultimately, this implies that the Church's vocation and mission is to facilitate a *koinonia* which is trinitarian, one that concretely images the life of God who is one as triune.

As is evident in the foregoing, one point that is strongly emphasized in both of these ancestral ecclesiologies, as well as in Ela's approach, is the abiding presence of the ancestors in the life of the family or community. For example, Nyamiti holds that the title to a sustained communication between the living and the ancestors is one of the cardinal features of the cult of the ancestors in Africa. And as we have seen already, Bujo sees the proto-ancestor as the focus of the family's gatherings to celebrate this shared life-force. The important point here is the potential which this recognition of the role of ancestors holds for the African understanding of the church in relation to the presence of Christ. To put it simply, in the African perspective, Christ has an abiding presence in the church. Whenever the community or family gathers together in word, prayer, sacrament and ministry Christ is present as the ancestral focus and sustainer of the community's life.

The above is an outline of two complementary approaches which underscore the importance of ancestors in

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93-96.

²⁰ ELA, *Le Cri.*, 9-17.

²¹ ELA, *My Faith.*, 87.

²² CHARLES NYAMITI, "The Church as Christ's Ancestral Mediation: An Essay on African Ecclesiology", in MUGAMBI and MAGESA, *Op. Cit.*, 132.

the African understanding of the church. They both stress the essential element of the cult of the ancestors in Africa which, in the words of Ela, constitutes a "communion, lived in faith" with ancestors²³. Combined with the other elements (community and family), the result is series of effects which pertain to the structure and organization of the church.

2. THE STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

The conception of the church by African ecclesiologists in terms of community, extended family and ancestors unveils vast possibilities relating to the structure and organization of the church. Precisely, as Pénoukou affirms, "*la vie africaine est si imprégnée de l'influence familiale, du sens de la communauté et de la solidarité, qu'il nous faudra nécessairement repenser en conséquence d'autres structures ecclésiales, qui soient davantage fidèles à l'appel d'amour fraternel du Christ*"²⁴. I shall consider some of these elements only briefly.

2.1. Authority

In ecclesiology the question of authority in the church has always been treated in relation to the position of the Pope, the successor of Peter, and that of bishops and ordained ministers. In connection with this, one model of church which has perdured through the several centuries of the church's evolution is that of a *pyramid*: a hierarchical-monarchical edifice, based on a strict separation of roles, with power devolving on the head of the *pyramid*, and trickling down through the different ecclesiastical rungs to the mass of lay faithful. African ecclesiologists contend, with reason, that this same model of (missionary) church is what was bequeathed to Africans.

However, in the three schemes within which African ecclesiologists attempt to elaborate an African ecclesiology, the pattern of authority in the church is shared rather than cen-

²³ ELA, *My Faith*, 26; cf. also 31.

²⁴ PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 22.

tralized. This means that any member of the community on whom the task of leadership devolves is not a "boss" but a son/daughter, brother/sister of the entire community/family, whose role is to build the community in solidarity with all the other members. These other members bear no less a vital responsibility for the edification of the community. It is in this sense that Pénoukou refers to the "model African Bishop" as first and foremost, "*à la fois fils et membre de cette Eglise, de cette communauté de foi, qui l'a engendré, l'a mûri et choisi. Il est d'abord fils et frère avant d'être père*"²⁵. Along the same lines of thought the role of the priest appears less as that of an authoritarian father, a chief or a boss, and more as that of a coordinator of charisms, an elder brother who is active on behalf of the parents. Like an elder brother who knows the mind of the parents he serves the needs of the family and works to resolve tension in the family by facilitating reconciliation and healing of divisions.

Since the ancestral life of the community circulates from its centre (and not from the head) to all members, authority in the church, considered from an African perspective, is primarily a service of "ecclesial life", promoted and deepened in solidarity with all, especially the less privileged members of the community²⁶. It is conceived and lived in terms of relationship rather than stifling and rigid hierarchical organization.

2.2. Diversity of Roles

Implicit in the foregoing is the question of the roles exercised by members of the community of faith in an African setting. Life in an African family, community or clan, as already mentioned, is never an undifferentiated cast of confused roles. The role of each member is clearly defined and respected by others. This is what Bujo refers to as "responsible diversity" aimed at fostering the proto-ancestral life in the local churches²⁷.

²⁵ PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 33 ff.

²⁶ BUJO, *Op. Cit.*, 96 ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

This responsible diversity precludes any "ministerial" monopoly of certain roles in the community. Each member is a servant who, together with the other members, forms a community in perpetual *diaconal* state²⁸, which is open to the contribution, however meagre, of each constituent member. This contribution or role is always in function of the real and felt needs of the particular community. The ramifications of this notion of responsible diversity are multiple.

Firstly, in addition to precluding any "clerical tyranny", it releases the sacerdotal potential of all Christians who, by virtue of their baptism, are sharers in the ecclesial ministry²⁹. Secondly, it facilitates the emergence of local churches that are autonomously in communion with other particular churches. In other words, communities that "can trust their own internal dynamics, their on-going ability to respond to challenges, and their on-going capacity to face all their crises and make full use of community resources and potential"³⁰. The key formula here is that authority empowers a communion of diversity rather than an unhealthy monopoly and competition.

This idea of autonomy of each local church leads to the consideration of another connected element of African ecclesiology, namely, the question of local and particular churches.

2.3. *Locality and Particularity*

From an African perspective, each community or extended family is local and particular. This means that it relies on its inner resources which are organized and placed at the service of its members, but does not exclude — by its character of hospitality and solidarity — openness to and solidarity with other communities or families. Simply put: the African community is a community of communities, each one defined by its particular physiognomy.

²⁸ Cf. PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 26, 27; ELA, *My Faith.*, 63.

²⁹ Cf. ELA, "Ecclesial Ministry...", 45 ff; *My Faith.*, 55 ff; ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps.*, 165; BUJO, *Op. Cit.*, 98.

³⁰ ELA, *My Faith.*, 60. See also ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps.*, 242, 248. ELA also critically examines the connected question of the financial self-sufficiency (*autonomie*) of local churches in *Voici le Temps.*, 213 ff.

In my opinion, African ecclesiologists have explored in considerable and laudable depth this idea of the particularity of African communities or families as epitomes of the nature and functioning of local churches. Applied to the church, locality is neither defined merely in geographical terms nor in terms of numerical growth of local clergy and pastoral agents³¹. Rather, it is the ability of the church "*à assumer dans la foi les valeurs réelles de leurs sociétés*"³². This openness to the values of its context necessarily implies particularity in its way of being church; of proclamation, sacramental and liturgical expression³³, and disciplinary regulations. Here the close link between locality and particularity is unmistakable.

In concrete terms, each African diocese is a local church by virtue of its insertion in a particular place and time. It is determined by the needs and circumstances of the times and place which shape the particular modes it assumes in expressing its mission and responding to these needs and circumstances. This is not to suggest that its local and particular character is inimical to the concept of universality. As Pénoukou rightly points out, in the light of a sound trinitarian theology, locality and particularity (not conformism) constitute the essential character of universality: "*Tout comme le Dieu Un et Unique est la communion de plusieurs personnes, L'Eglise universelle est la communion réelles des Eglises particulières. On ne peut parler d'Eglise universelle que si les Eglises locales sauvegardent et développent leur identité propre, dans le respect du bien commun de la foi. L'Eglise apparaît ainsi comme la communauté des communautés...*"³⁴.

Locality and particularity are further actualized in the Small Christian Communities. One way of considering these communities is to look at them as cells of the local churches, which incorporate the essential characters of these latter and facilitate an effective integration of the members into the community of faith: "*Les petites communautés sont le lieu*

³¹ Cf. ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps*, 235.

³² PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 19. ELA is in complete agreement with Pénoukou on this point. See ELA, *Le Cri*, 131, 133-135.

³³ See ELA's argument for the use of African symbolism to express the message of Christianity in *My Faith*, 44-50; ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps*, 176-183.

³⁴ PÉNOUKOU *Op. Cit.*, 18. Cf. also ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps*, 215.

privilégié où l'Eglise se restructure dans tous les domaines, où les chrétiens, en de lieux divers, apprennent à se passer de génies protecteurs et à perdre le goût et l'habitude de la servitude"³⁵. Archbishop Teissier of Algiers takes this reflection further by drawing a strong conclusion regarding the local and particular character of christian communities: "The basic Christian communities should not be considered as the seeds or the cells of a more fully fledged Church, but (they) are local churches in their own right..."³⁶.

2.4. Dialogue

Perhaps the most incontrovertible factor of contemporary African ecclesiology is that of religious pluralism, Christian and non-Christian. This is one aspect that African ecclesiologists cannot overlook without risking their credibility, and losing their attentiveness to the "signs of the times". How does the African understanding of church affect the structures of dialogue in a context of religious pluralism?

African ecclesiologists are quick to point out that the expansive African community or family is essentially *ecumenical*: It embraces "members of all faiths"³⁷. As indicated above, the faiths referred to here are not to be narrowly conceived as Christian faiths (Mainline, Protestant, and African Independent Churches). They also include African Traditional Religion and Islam³⁸.

In Africa, it is not uncommon for a particular clan, community, or family to accomodate adherents of these diverse faiths. While it is true that this diversity occasions tensions, it is no less true that such tensions are constructively resolved in the community, precisely because, as I have indicated, for Africans, faith in God is a family affair. It is based on mutual acceptance and creative submission to the ideals and aspirations of the entire family. This quality of mutual acceptance and openness, rather than litigious and contentious divisions

³⁵ ELA and LENEAU, *Voici le Temps.*, 252; cf. 162, and ELA, *My Faith.*, 131.

³⁶ Quoted by SINGLETON, "A Changing Church...", 22.

³⁷ WALIGGO, "The African Clan...", 124.

³⁸ Ela goes as far as suggesting the desirability of "learning from Islam" its promise of "*bien-être*" to its adherents. ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps.*, 193-196.

that has often characterised the western church's approach to (ecumenical) dialogue, forms the basis of dialogue in a truly African church modeled on the ideals of an African community of faith³⁹.

CONCLUSION

There are two terms whose recurrence I find striking in the scanty literature on African ecclesiology: invention (creation) and imagination. And I began this essay by reaffirming the incontestable fact that Jesus Christ did not bequeath a blueprint for the structural and juridical organization of the church to the Apostles. The task of building the church was to be effected by these latter in fidelity to the task of proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom under the prompting and direction of the Holy Spirit.

The undetermined nature of the 'church' Jesus Christ left behind constitutes in itself a mandate which *ought* to proffer free reign to the imagination and creativity of African ecclesiologists who have attempted to construct an African ecclesiology, that is, an understanding of the church in a truly African sense. This survey, albeit not exhaustive, leaves me disappointed for three reasons.

In the first place, from all indications, the inventiveness and imagination of African ecclesiologists have responded inadequately to the task of elaborating an African ecclesiology of comparable depth to what has been developed in other parts of the church. With very limited exception⁴⁰ African ecclesiologists adopt a facile and descriptive approach. Their treatment of ecclesiological themes lacks analytical and theological depth and weight, making their work hardly distinguishable from that of anthropologists, sociologists and ethnologists.

Secondly, even the meagre results of the ecclesiological creativity and inventiveness of some African theologians bear little or no impact on the concrete organization and experience of the reality called church in Africa. None would

³⁹ Cf. PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 109 ff.

⁴⁰ Here I refer to E.-J. Pénoukou and J.-M. Ela who both agree on several of the essential elements of African ecclesiology.

dispute the fact that the African church is still largely organized as a hierarchical, legalistic and clericalized entity. Very few aspects of the African understanding of the church as a community (clan or family) of solidarity, hospitality... are perceptible in the African church.

Thirdly, one of the fundamental orientations of the ecclesiology of Vatican II is the conception of the mission of the church. This orientation is so central that the church itself is defined and constituted by its mission⁴¹. This central element is hardly noticeable in the approaches of African ecclesialogists. There is potential in the three elements which define the African understanding of the church, namely, community, family and ancestors, that would provide the basis for the development of an African ecclesiology that includes mission as one of its constitutive symbols. For example, the very constitution of the family or community under the auspices of the ancestors is in itself missionary, that is, a sign to others. The church, understood in this way, constitutes no less a sign of God's presence to others. The life of the family or community is not merely lived or expressed in the physical proximity that occasions for the celebration of life bring. Rather, the life of the family or community flows out in solidarity, fellowship, compassion, dialogue, justice and mutual solicitude, which then become characteristic of the relationship existing among the members of the family or community and others.

The significant revelation of this brief study, therefore, is that it points *not* to the past, that is, to an established African ecclesiology, but to the future: an African understanding of the church that is *to-be-constructed*. The study is reflective, then, of the essential character of the African church as echoed in the word of Pénoukou: "*Eglise africaine en marche, Eglise à construire. Il y a tant de choses à penser et à entreprendre, pour que le Christ s'incarne vraiment chez nous, dans notre histoire, dans nos traditions, dans nos mentalité, dans notre vie*"⁴². The option open to this African

⁴¹ This orientation is amply elaborated in *Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes*, and later by PAUL VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

⁴² PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 22-23; cf. also Ela, *Le Cri.*, 140-141.

church is as decisive in its simplicity as it is in its gravity: "Nos Eglises d'Afrique seront africaines ou ne seront pas"⁴³; "L'Eglise doit se détruire comme structure de chrétienté afin de retrouver une créativité qui réponde aux problèmes posés par le 'choc' de l'Évangile en milieu africain"⁴⁴.

It is in the light of the above awareness that one can effectively appreciate the importance of the model of *church-as-family* of God adopted by the *African Synod*, which I have alluded to in the course of this study. By so doing the *Synod* gives renewed impetus to the African ecclesiological project which will be decisive in determining the future, credibility and survival of the African church.

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⁴³ PÉNOUKOU, *Op. Cit.*, 43.

⁴⁴ ELA, *Le Cri*, 132; cf. also, ELA and LUNEAU, *Voici le Temps*, 229-230.