

‘The Church is the Mother of Christians’: The Relevance of the Church in Contemporary Era

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Introduction

Natural disasters come and go, so do pandemics. The Church, amid it all is not left unaffected. She is tried and tested during such times as is the faith of her members. How can the Church be a Mother to Christians, even in these times of adversity? The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that ‘it is in the Church, in communion with all the Baptized that the Christian fulfils his vocation.’¹ From the Church one receives the following; the Word of God with the teachings of the “Law of Christ,” the grace of the Sacraments to sustain one on the way, learns an example of holiness, recognizes its model and the source in the all-holy Virgin Mary, discern the authentic teaching of those who live it as well as discover in the spiritual tradition and long history of the saints who have gone before.² This, in a nutshell describes the Church as the Mother and what it does, teaching, sanctifying and developing a Christian. The Magisterium describes the Church as the “pillar and bulwark of truth.”³

Images of the Church

The Church has seven precepts set in the context of a moral and Christian life bound to and nourished by liturgical life.⁴ The Church must teach, interpret and defend the Word of God.⁵ The Church is presented as the universal sign and sacrament of salvation, “for she is at once a visible assembly and spiritual community.”⁶ The Church is presented in *Lumen Gentium* 8 as a woman. In imaging the Church, Preston uses ten metaphors, Church as; i) *Ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) or Assembly, ii) The People of God, iii) Brotherhood, iv) Temple, v) Flock, vi) Kingdom, vii) The Poor of the Lord, viii) The Bride of Christ, ix) The Body of Christ and x) New Creation (v).

Church as a Family

As the African Synod of 1994 puts it, ‘the future of the world and of

the Church passes through the Family. Not only is the Christian family the first cell of the living ecclesial community, but it is also the fundamental cell of the society.' The Synod views the African family as 'the foundation on which the social edifice is built.'⁷ To this end, the synod considers the 'evangelization of the African family as a major priority.'⁸ Orobator views the African social fabric as in danger of collapse because of the cumulative impact of the deteriorating economic crisis.⁹ As a matter of fact, the Synodal Fathers acknowledge the vital connection between challenges of the African family and the mission of the Church. This view synchronizes with that of Nigerian Political economist, Adebayo Adedeji who considers that 'the African social structure is currently undergoing severe strain and stresses.'¹⁰ This goes to show that social structures have an important role to play in moulding the Mother Church by binding people together. In Zimbabwe, the socio-economic hardships have contributed to breakdown in social structures namely the extended family system. Natural disasters including the COVID pandemic, leave families stranded, isolated and vulnerable. It is at times like this that the warmth of the Church is felt even if it means keeping virtually connected to her members.

Church as Mother

The Church as a woman, whether as a girl or bride or wife or mother or widow is an image in the Old Testament (OT) and finding new life in the New Testament.¹¹ Church as a woman is more basic compared to Church as a bride. The more primary image that enables the Church to be a bride is the Church as a woman. While Second John refers to one local church as 'Elect Lady' (vs 1) and the other as 'Elect Sister (vs 13), First Peter refers to the Church as 'She who is in Babylon, elect together with you' (1 Pet 5:13). For Preston, this lady, this woman, whether the Church throughout the world, or Church in a particular locality, may be seen not as a bride but as Mother.¹² This was a development of the image of the Church which became significant in the early Christian centuries and has remained an important part towards popular piety to this modern day, 'Our Holy Mother the Church.'¹³ Roots for this development are seen in

the New Testament (NT) for example in Gal 4:26, where Paul speaks of ‘the Jerusalem, which is above our mother,’ echoing Isaiah’s words on the faithful mother city of Zion. This is one way of talking to a Church as a moral person, distinct from Christ and not just the ‘whole Christ’ and yet distinct from any members of the Church.¹⁴ Preston views the image of the mother Church as the individual members of the Church thought of ‘as children of the Church even though there is no subsistent entity of the Church altogether distinct from the sum total of the individual members of the Church.’¹⁵ The Church thus nurtures her children and gives strength and guidance on how to cope even in difficult times.

Church in Small Christian Community

The Church can also be viewed as the Mother of Christians in the Small Christian Community (SCC). Viewing the Church at this level is being truly relevant because it is here that the members of God’s community interact on religious and spiritual matters at a personal level. It is here that the members feel the warmth provided by the Church. The growth and influence of SCC throughout Africa are mixed, with them not having taken root in some parts of the continent.¹⁶ ‘Where they are flourishing, SCCs are an important pastoral strategy and even a new way of being a communitarian Church.’¹⁷ The ‘new moment’ includes strengthening of parish-based as well as family-based SCCs that are faith-sharing or Bible-sharing groups based on lectionary readings, building on the implementation of the 1994 Synod and the ecclesiology of the ‘Church-as-Family.’ For Healey and Hinton, SCCs are an essential part of the restructuring process in both parish and dioceses through SCC members who reach out to the poor and marginalized people in their community. This way the SCC can reach out to those in the community who are sick, be it cancer, HIV, or other burdens of life even before the priest gets to know about it. As a matter of fact, the Pastoral theme for the Archdiocese of Harare for this year is, ‘I am a Missionary Disciple in my SCC - Baptized and Sent.’ By reaching out to members in the SCC through her membership, the Church is exercising her missionary mandate, serving as an umbrella, the Mother Church.

In Healey and Hinton's opinion, SCCs can work as a bridging gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' being important catalysts of peace and reconciliation in the communities.¹⁸ This way SCCs act not just as prayer groups but making concrete follow up on justice and peace issues at local level.

Pope John Paul II states in *Apostolic Exhortation on the African Synod*: 'Above all, these communities are to be committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of natural solidarity of clans, tribes and other interest groups.'¹⁹ The final message of the Synod states that the communities will provide the best means to fight against ethnocentrism within the Church itself and within the nations, as 'these individual Church-in-Families have the task of working to transform society.' The youths in Africa should not be left out as they desire to have their own Youth Groups or communities to discuss and reflect on matters concerning them. Since the youths are found on Social Media, the Holy Father advises the Church to follow them where they are. The African men also need to be part of this umbrella Mother Church and continued efforts to in-cooperate them is an ongoing process in an all-inclusive approach. Thus, Healey and Hinton argue that the parish-based SCCs challenge dioceses in Europe and North America where the parish is not a 'home' or 'community' for people but only a provider of services, due to the growing secularization in these continents.²⁰ In the contemporary era, engaging SCCs and other Christian groups in various spiritual activities helps bond members together even in their brokenness caused by the pandemic.

The Body of Christ

St. Paul uses the term 'church' sixty-five times in his writings. He views the Church as the Body of Christ, who is its head and from whom the Church receives her fullness (Col 1:18; Eph 5:22-24, 29-30). For Paul, the members of the body have different functions all belonging to the same body and each with a particular function (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-26, 27-31; Eph. 4:11-14). In Hahn's view²¹, the Church as the body of Christ gives Paul the means to stress the unity amongst all believers

(Cor. 12:12; Rom 12:4). For him, this unity finds its sacramental reality first in Baptist (1 Cor. 12:13) then in the Eucharist: because ‘there is one bread, we who are many are one body’ (1 Cor. 10:17). Thus, since the Church is one body with Christ as its head, she should strive to work as one. The challenges faced in today’s world are seen when the members of this body of Christ, the Mother, begin to compete rather than to work together. This can only be possible if the Church continues to function as the ‘Living Temple’, indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-117; Eph 2:19-22; Mat 16:18). The Church is built on Christ the ‘living cornerstone’, into a ‘spiritual house’ where the true sacrifices are offered (1 Pet 2:5). The Holy Spirit binds people together into a united people, under one umbrella, the Mother Church. These members are children of God (Eph 4:1-6) and equal members in the kingdom reconciled through the love of Christ. If one could draw an extrapolation from Hahn’s view, all children from the same mother are to be considered special.²² Our contemporary setting tends to classify ‘children of this same Mother’ based on social status, wealth, level of education or public visibility. There is no better time to work together as members of the Body of Christ than in times of adversity

Conclusion

The Church is indeed the Mother of Christians. The Church, in communion with all the Baptized, helps Christians fulfil their vocation. The Church shares the Word of God, teaches on matters of faith and helps impart sanctifying grace through the sacraments. The Church nourishes, sustains and develops a Christian spiritually. The Magisterium describes the Church as the pillar of truth. In the contemporary era, the Church’s relevance in nourishing, sustaining, and developing the baptized in their spiritual life. The family is the first Church and basic unit with which the Mother Church is built. The SCC is particularly strategic in propagating pastoral ministry as the Church’s building blocks through these Parish subunits. It is the members in the SCCs who are instrumental in reaching out to the sick as well as enforce justice and peace at community level. ‘A family that prays together, stays together.’

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 - ² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2030
 - ³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2032
 - ⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2041, 2048
 - ⁵ Dupuis, Jacques. *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church.* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2008.) 299.
 - ⁶ Dupuis, Jacques. *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church,* 300.
 - ⁷ John Paul II. *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 14, 1995). www.vatican.va Accessed 1 November 2020. 2
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 - ⁹ Orobator A. E. *The Church as Family; African Ecclesiology in its context.* 49.
 - ¹⁰ Orobator A. E. *The Church as Family; African Ecclesiology in its context.* 49
 - ¹¹ Preston, Geoffrey. *Faces of the Church, Meditations on a Mystery and its Images.* Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1997, 78
 - ¹² Preston, Geoffrey. *Faces of the Church, Meditations on a Mystery and its Images.* 84
 - ¹³ Preston, Geoffrey. *Faces of the Church, Meditations on a Mystery and its Images.*84
 - ¹⁴ Preston, Geoffrey. *Faces of the Church, Meditations on a Mystery and its Images.* 84
 - ¹⁵ Preston, Geoffrey. *Faces of the Church, Meditations on a Mystery and its Images.* 84
 - ¹⁶ Healy Nicholas M. *Church, World and the Christian Life; Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology.* Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 97
 - ¹⁷ Healy Nicholas M. *Church, World and the Christian Life* 97
 - ¹⁸ Healy Nicholas M. *Church, World and the Christian Life* 97
 - ¹⁹ *Apostolic Exhortation on the African Synod*
 - ²⁰ Healy Nicholas M. *Church, World and the Christian Life* 98
 - ²¹ Hahn, Scott (Gen. Ed.). *Catholic Bible Dictionary.* United States of America: Doubleday, 2009. 58
 - ²² Hahn, Scott (Gen. Ed.). *Catholic Bible Dictionary* 58