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**CHANGES IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

**The Context of Cameroon**

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# CHANGES IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

## The Context of Cameroon

JEAN OLIVIER NKE ONGONO

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**Zusammenfassung:** Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil hat mit einer besonderen Bezugnahme auf die Theologie der Laien zu einer Erneuerung der Leitung in der Kirche geführt. Dieses neue Paradigma, das ganz im Sinne des Evangeliums ist und die Leitung als Dienst darstellt, wird von der Kirche im Kamerun nach und nach angenommen. Die schrittweise Einbeziehung aller Gläubigen in die Leitung der Ortskirchen hat im Kamerun eine besondere Bedeutung, wenn man die dortige, sehr patriarchalische Kultur berücksichtigt. Die Schritte, die bereits unternommen wurden, sind daher hoch zu schätzen. Jedoch bleibt noch viel zu tun, insbesondere was die Einbeziehung kompetenter gläubiger Laien in die Entscheidungsgremien betrifft. Um zu diesem Ziel zu gelangen, bedarf es einer angemessenen Ausbildung und einer guten Katechese als Vorbereitung auf einen Wandel, der wirksam ist und akzeptiert wird.

**Riassunto:** Il Concilio Vaticano II, con una referenza specifica alla teologia del laicato, ha condotto ad una rinascita della leadership nella Chiesa. Questo nuovo paradigma che è tutto conforme al vangelo, e che dipinge l'autorità come servizio, è progressivamente accolto dalla Chiesa in Camerun. La progressiva inclusione di tutti i fedeli nella leadership ha una connotazione particolare in Camerun, tenendo conto della cultura locale la quale è molto patriarcale. I passi fatti sono dunque da apprezzare. Tuttavia, c'è ancora molto da fare, specificamente con l'inclusione dei fedeli laici competenti nelle istituzioni decisionali. Per arrivarci servono un'adeguata educazione e una buona catechesi come preparazione remota ad un cambiamento effettivo e accettato.

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### 1 Introduction

The Church as a 'spiritual' and 'perfect' society enjoys its particular self-understanding and organization. Its organization is ever adapting itself to the various epochs, and socio-cultural realities on its non-essential elements. The great societal changes of the 20th cent. that saw inter alia an empowerment, or at least a recognition of the dignity of some social classes that were for centuries considered inferior, coupled with the revival brought by the Second Vatican Council with specific reference to the 'Theology of the Laity', the correct understanding of authority as service, and the insistence on co-responsibility, have all led to some shifts in the understanding and actual exercise of leadership at various levels of the life of the Church. In effect, the mission is one and unique though the functions and charisms are different in the same and unique vineyard. This global shift, with its values of consideration and integration of all in the various aspects of the life of the community, which began out of the confines of the Church, has found its way within the Church as it is rightly perceived as a positive value.

In the context of the Church of Cameroon, this shift has a particular echo as it encounters a society with a specific world view and a traditional societal organization. There then arises the question: which substantial changes have there been at the level of leadership within the Church of Cameroon? But before attempting to give an answer to this question, a prior question must be addressed: How should we understand Church Leadership?

## 2 The *status quaestionis* – The Understanding of Leadership in the Church

How should we understand leadership within the context of the Church? This question stands at the onset of our brief enquiry and requires a more or less clear response. In effect, the classic and common understanding of leadership sees it as practical skills that encompass the ability of an individual, of a group or organization to lead, to influence, or to guide other individuals, teams, or entire organizations. Since the life and mission of the Church are always to be considered not only *ad intra* but also *ad extra*, in the context of the Church, we can then view leadership first *ad intra* as the capacity to stand both at the front line and in midst of the community, building from the words of St. Augustine of Hippo: *For you I am a bishop and with you I am a Christian*<sup>1</sup>. And secondly, *ad extra*, that is, in relation to the civil society in which it finds itself. Does it play a leading function in civil society? And what can the perspectives be? But here we are interested only in leadership *ad intra*.

In this perspective, we consider it as a reflection within the general field of practical theology. In this way, ecclesiastical leadership will be anchored on the principles of Canon Law, with a specific outlook from Pastoral Theology and other related theological studies, the Church's Social Teaching, and other social and cultural studies. Leadership, thus, has an 'inclusive' semantic meaning, that is, it refers to all, and not to some aspects of the life of the Church. Obviously, the relevance of all elements cannot be equal. But then, not a single aspect of the life of the Church falls *per se* outside the field of interest of leadership. As such, speaking of leadership within the Church would mean examining all these aspects of the same and unique leadership. In this way, there are some qualities recognized to the leader who, as the *Code of Canon Law* says in can. 1284, should be a *bonus Paterfamilias*<sup>2</sup>.

Flowing from the above, speaking of changes in leadership in the context of the Church will concern all questions relevant to ecclesiastical leadership, strategy, administration, management, and other specific issues important in the life of the particular churches or groupings of particular churches, and religious orders. The idea behind this strategy, or inclusive approach, is to better analyse the changes that the Church in Cameroon has known since its implantation.

## 3 Changes in Church Leadership in Cameroon

### 3.1 Leadership Changes at the Levels of the Clergy and Episcopacy

From the first eucharistic celebration on Cameroonian soil, on 8 December 1890 (in Marienberg by Pater Heinrich Vieter) until 1916, only German Pallotine Missionaries from Limburg were present in Cameroon. After these, French Holy Ghost Missionaries (Spiritains) and the British Mill-Hill missionaries<sup>3</sup> arrived. It is only on the 8 December 1935 that the first eight Cameroonian priests were ordained. Almost 90 years after these first priestly ordinations, most diocesan

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 340.1.

<sup>2</sup> Can. 1284, § 1: „Omnes administratores diligentia boni patrisfamilias suum munus implere tenentur.“

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ngono, *Honorine*, L'autonomie financière dans la mission d'évangélisation de l'Église en Afrique: le cas du Cameroun, Paris 2015, 139.

priests in Cameroon are locals, along with the members of religious institutes, most of whom, also, are of Cameroonian nationality.

In the same light, at the time of the first missionary synod of Cameroon in 1906 and the first plenary council of the Ordinaries of the Cameroonian Missions in 1949, none of the apostolic vicars and prefects present at those meetings was of Cameroonian descent<sup>4</sup>. But nowadays only one diocesan bishop is of foreign origin. This fact is significant at the level of leadership as the Church is not seen as a foreign institution with foreign pastors and administrators. The growth of a hierarchy primarily made up of locals obviously contributes to the acceptance of the Church as a local reality and institution.

## 3.2 Leadership Changes at the Level of Participation

### 3.2.1 The Reality of Delegated Authority

The reality of delegated authority is, at this point worthy of mention. In the different dioceses that constitute the national episcopal conference are, in a general way, constituted most of the institutes and persons who assist the bishop in the government of the diocese *ex can.* 469. These institutes and persons receive some delegated power from the bishop and participate in the ordinary administration of the diocese according to the prerogatives proper to each in universal or particular law. In this light, the different councils proposed or requested by the universal legislator do exist. The efficiency of their participation in the administration of the diocese requires some other consideration.

### 3.2.2 The implantation and Growth of Religious Movements

In the dioceses and parishes exist many associations commonly called *bikoan*<sup>5</sup>. Some of these associations may be open via membership only, to a category of the faithful, while in others, membership is open to all the faithful. Belonging to one or more of these associations is a common practice. In this way, the parish communities essentially have an associative connotation. The delegates of the various associations generally constitute, with some other appointed persons, the parish pastoral council that organizes the pastoral life under the direction of the parish priest, who, by law, is its president. The parishes seem to live only through the associations that constitute them. Such a structural organization, though perfectible, guarantees a certain form of involvement of all the categories of the faithful and of groups that constitute the parish community in its life and administration. The same principle can be verified at the level of the diocese or at other levels of the life of local Churches.

## 3.3 Leadership Changes at the Level of Lay Participation

### 3.3.1 Established Meetings Between Clergy and Lay Faithful

In almost all the dioceses of Cameroon exists a Diocesan Council of the Laity. Organized meetings, during which clerics and laity report, discuss, and reach decisions that enable the good

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Messina, Jean Paul / Slageren, Jaap Van*, Histoire du christianisme au Cameroun: des origines à nos jours. Approche œcuménique, Yaoundé 2005, 403; Cf. *Conférence Épiscopale Nationale du Cameroun*, Première conférence plénière des Ordinaires des missions du Cameroun français.

<sup>5</sup> This name, which is an 'Ewondo' word simply meaning 'association' or 'group', is mostly used in the East, Centre and South of Cameroon, though it may be understood by most Cameroonians.

functioning of the particular Church, take place, at a frequency that depends on each diocese. All layers of the laity are represented at these meetings: catechists, movements and associations, delegates from pastoral and economic councils, youth, clerics, religious etc. In the diocese of Edea, in the ecclesiastical province of Douala, this meeting is held systematically at the start of each pastoral year and before the Easter celebrations<sup>6</sup>.

### 3.3.2 A Greater Involvement of the Laity in the Administration of the Local Churches

There is an ever-greater number of lay persons involved in the administration of the local churches and in decision-making structures. For example, at the National Episcopal Conference, out of a total number of 148 employees, there are four religious women, 13 clerics, 59 lay men, and 89 lay women. Though they may not all be involved in decision-making, these numbers are already significant and are the expression of an effort to ensure the participation of all the faithful in the life of the local Church.

### 3.3.3 The Empowerment of Women

Women are clearly the most numerous among the faithful in Cameroon, just as in the rest of the world. It should, therefore, not be surprising that they occupy positions of responsibility in the leadership of the Church. But in the cultural context of Cameroon, like in most African countries, implementing this is greatly challenging and significant.

In the Diocese of Edea, two women have been appointed to the Economic Council. At the level of the Diocesan Council of the Laity, out of 13 members, eight are women. In the Archdiocese of Yaoundé, more than twenty years ago, the chancellor was a woman. A fact, which should not be surprising as it is not *contra legem*. But implementing it in this particular cultural context ought to be seen as a clear sign of a willingness to make all the faithful participate effectively and according to personal charisms in the growth of the local Church. In addition, in many parishes, women are appointed as Delegates of the Parish Pastoral Council. These elements are important shifts, considering the fact that most local cultures are, to some extent, patriarchal.

### 3.3.4 Lay Participation to the Financing of Local Churches

With regards to the financing of the particular churches, it should be noted that there is a praiseworthy good-will on the part of the faithful who are greatly charitable. The participation of all the faithful in the financial life of the Church, which is mandatory by law, ought all the same to be underlined in the context of Cameroon, as it is for most churches of recent evangelization. In effect, locals have not been educated from the onset to take care of their Church. This is due to the system of the Commission<sup>7</sup>, which entailed that the religious order, to which was assigned the evangelization of a particular territory provided 'entirely' for the financial needs of the Mission as well as it supplied missionaries. Though the Commission was suppressed in 1969<sup>8</sup>, many local churches, until now, have not succeeded in becoming self-sufficient financially. To a great extent, this is also the case of the Church in Cameroon. But then, a praiseworthy effort is

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<sup>6</sup> In this light too, in the past decades, some dioceses have held synods: The archdiocese of Yaoundé (2015) and the diocese of Mamfe (2011-2012).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, *Instructio Quum huic* (08 dec. 1929), in: AAS 22 (1930) 111-115. The Commission is to be understood as « il sistema di affidare un territorio di missione ad un determinato Istituto per la sua evangelizzazione » (*García Martín, Julio, L'azione missionaria nel Codex iuris canonici*, Roma 2005, 257).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Paulus VI*, *Constitutio apostolica de romana curia Regimini Ecclesiae universae* (15 aug. 1967), n° 81, in: AAS 59 (1967) 885-928, 915.

being made by many local communities. For example, at St. Therese of the Child Jesus Parish of Kribi (New-Town) it was reported by the parish priest that all the needs of the parish, and even the ongoing construction works, are totally sponsored by parishioners. But the quality or quantity of these contributions is obviously conditioned by the socio-economic context.

## **4 Common and Meaningful Challenges for Church Leadership in Cameroon**

### **4.1 The Conception of Authority in the African / Cameroonian Culture**

It is often said that the African, in a general way, finds and recognizes himself in an authoritarian and strong power, personified in a single monarch who reigns without sharing. Even if this assertion may, in some cases, be verified, we cannot systematically attribute authoritarianism to all African leaders. The tendency to exercise power in an authoritarian manner is a human tendency and not an African one. But it is not impossible that, in Cameroon, Church leaders at various levels exercise their authority in the manner of traditional chiefs. In this way, even if all or almost all the structures of participation and, therefore, prerequisites for a better leadership do exist, this does not guarantee a real participative exercise of leadership. But this is not proper to Cameroon or to Africa; it is a human tendency.

### **4.2 The Great Diversity of the Cameroonian Society**

Cameroon is a country characterized by a remarkable cultural diversity. Politics and religion are 'bound' to follow the paths designed by this multiculturalism. Unfortunately, it is a big challenge for the Catholic Church, whose leadership may not always be in line with the cultural background of the people of God. In Cameroon there co-exist 232 ethnic groups with different languages, lifestyles, and cultures. There exist two official languages (French and English), two educational and juridical systems, and, by the way, two different organizations of social life. In this way, in Cameroon, you might have a Church leader who does not know the culture of the people he is sent to and that he must 'lead'. This may not work, since in the mindset of the people, ethnicity has a lot of weight; and it is so at all levels of social life. People spontaneously identify themselves according to the cultural, tribal, or ethnic paradigm. There is more joy when it is the "son of the land" who caters for his brethren. It is often implicitly expected that the leader be affiliated, in one way or the other, with the people to which he is sent. This also happens to be explicitly expressed<sup>9</sup>.

### **4.3 The Low Presence of the Laity in the Decision-Making Institution**

Though lay participation, in general, is increasing, in more important decision-making institutions there is a lower percentage of the lay faithful. For example:

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<sup>9</sup> This observation of a Cameroonian prelate, though in another context, is significant here: "We cannot account today for the conceptions and practices [...] without resorting to the history and contexts in which the Church was established and developed in Cameroon. In addition, the difference in approach of local Churches located in English-speaking and French-speaking areas explains this legacy coming from the work of the first missionaries" (*Atanga, Joseph, Préface*, in: Ngono, *L'autonomie* (note 2), 5-6, 5).

- The council of the curia of the Diocese of Kribi comprises 12 members, among whom are 10 clerics, one female religious, and one lay person.
- The council of the curia of the Diocese of Obala comprises 23 persons, among whom are 20 clerics, two female religious, and one lay person.
- The council of the curia of the Diocese of Edea has 11 members, all of whom are clerics.

#### **4.4 The Low Presence or Total Absence of Women at Certain Levels of the Life of the Church**

What is more is that ecclesiastical administration seems particularly male-dominated. Though women are more involved and far more engaged than men in the life of the Church in Cameroon, they are not sufficiently represented in the decision-making institutions. Pope Francis' mode of governing could be inspiring in this regard. But then, any analysis of this reality that fails to study it within the Cameroonian socio-cultural context may not propose efficient solutions.

## **5 Conclusion**

In the context of Cameroon, the consideration of the praiseworthy changes in Church leadership, with their numerous setbacks, aims at offering tools for:

- more competent persons in leadership positions at all levels of the life of the local Church
- more inclusion of all categories of the faithful
- as well as adequate structures, institutions, and reformed canonical and extracanonial regulations

In effect,

- good leadership has to be strong in principles but also attentive to changing realities and new challenges
- with regard to the difficult integration of women in decision-making institutions, since this seems to be based on a cultural heritage, which is not proper to Cameroon, a proper education and a good catechesis are necessary as remote preparation for an effective and accepted change. In fact, without it there can be no lasting change.

The situation in Cameroon, although not identical to that of the other local churches, is similar to many others. Thus, this particular context can be studied and the lessons learned from it can be applied to other contexts with the necessary adaptations.