

**HANDBOOK
OF
AFRICAN CATHOLICISM**

Edited by
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Stan Chu Ilo, editor

Anthropologists, sociologists and theologians from foreign churches have been studying us for many years. . . . We have become a fertile field for the kind of research that will enable a person to write an “interesting” thesis and obtain an academic degree. . . . It is therefore not surprising that we do not recognize ourselves in their writings.

—South African Independent Church Leaders, 1994.¹

Why the *Handbook of African Catholicism*?

The essays in this *Handbook* provide a disciplinary roadmap for scholars, church leaders, and all those who are interested in understanding African Catholicism today and the momentum of Christian expansion in Africa.² Contributors to this volume tell the stories of how the Catholic Church has emerged as a culture-shaping religious tradition in Africa. Readers are invited to follow the footprints of God in Africa as we tell the story of the Christian mission in Africa, which goes back to the first centuries. This mission has opened up multiple theological, doctrinal, social, and pastoral streams in Africa, all of which canalize into the richly diverse spiritual river of both the old and new African Christian traditions today that exude both multiplicities in their expressions and dynamism in growth.

Each chapter introduces readers to the current state of research in specific areas of Christian life and mission in African Catholicism, and to different methodological approaches adopted by practi-

tioners in understanding this Christian tradition as it crosses different cultural, religious, and social frontiers in Africa. The essays are groundbreaking because contributors transgress disciplinary silos and regnant methodological canons in theological studies and in the social sciences. At the same time, contributors weave innovative and refreshing accounts around the central themes, trends, and features of African Catholic communities of faith. They also narrate the stories of the hopes and dreams of these communities of faith as well as their pastoral and social engagement with the challenges and opportunities of the social context in Africa.

Authors identify for readers the intellectual traditions that have developed in the Catholic Church in Africa and some of the persistent issues and paradoxes in this particular Christian tradition vis-à-vis the social condition in Africa. These essays shine a spotlight on African Catholicism as a source of hope and transformative missional praxis in Africa in dialogue and collaboration with other religious, social, and political actors in the continent. The essays also locate African Catholi-

1. N. H. Nganda et al., *Speaking for Ourselves: African Independent Churches* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Institute for Contextual Theology, 1985), 5.

2. Paul Avis, in a private email to me inviting me to contribute to the *Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, framed the task of any handbook as that of providing “a disciplinary map” for understanding the continuities and discontinuities in any field of study.

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cism within the larger complexity of global history, world Christianity, and the contested notions of modernity. The essays particularly engage some of the bigger issues in the Catholic tradition in the West and the tension between the Roman center and the local Catholic churches in Africa on such issues as the autonomy of local churches, centralization versus contextualization, charism versus authority in the church, new religious movements, Catholic education, inculturation, social concerns, and Catholic intellectual traditions.

These essays are not meant simply to stir people's interests in the peregrination of the gospel message in Africa, and in the multiple paths that divine providence is opening for African Christians in the Catholic Church. Rather, the hope is that these essays will steer conversations about the Christian mission in Africa along the path of greater attention to how Africans themselves faithfully and credibly live their faith, tell the stories of the faith, interpret this faith, and respond to the challenges and opportunities they face in Africa today through the different appeals they make to this faith experience.

The Growth and Prospects of Catholicism in Africa

Flying back to Rome after his five-day "pilgrimage of peace as an apostle of hope" to Africa in 2015, Pope Francis in reply to a question about the most

memorable part of his trip said, "For me, Africa was a surprise. God always surprises us, but Africa surprises us too. I remember many moments, but above all, I remember the crowds." Pope Francis spoke of Africa as a continent of hope.³ Africa always surprises visitors to Africa and Africans themselves because it is a rich continent with immense human and material resources, a rich cultural diversity, multiple religious traditions built on a vibrancy of youth often called "Africa's youth bulge," and creativity in all aspects of human life.⁴ The words of Pope Francis evoked happy memories of similar sentiments of hope and joy expressed by previous popes about the beauty of African cultures, civilization, and spiritualities. Pope Paul VI, in his first visit to Africa in 1969,⁵ extolled the spirituality and closeness of Africans to God and to a sense of community, which reminds me of the words of the nineteenth-century Scottish missionary to Africa, David Livingstone, "Already Africa is God's. God did not wait for me to bring Him. I found Him in every village."⁶

Writing in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed: "A precious treasure is to be found in the soul of Africa, where I perceive a 'spiritual lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope" (*AM* §13).⁷ In a similar vein, Pope John Paul II in his 1994 post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*,⁸ extolled African Christianity with these words: "Indeed, this continent is today

3. Vatican Insider: "Pope opens Holy Door: Today Bangui is the spiritual capital of the world," *La Stampa* (November 29, 2015), <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2015/11/29/news/pope-opens-holy-door-to-day-bangui-is-the-spiritual-capital-of-the-world-1.35211106>.

4. See Alexander Thurston, "Religion, Society, and Conflict," in *The Fabric of Peace in Africa*, ed. Pamela Aall and Chester A. Crocker (Waterloo, ON: Center for International Governance Innovation, 2017), 260: "As of 2014, half of Sub-Saharan Africa's population was under the age of 25, and 'each year between 2015 and 2035, there will be half a million more 15-year-olds than the year before.'"

5. Pope Paul VI, address to the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, Kampala (July 31, 1969), 1; *AAS* 61 (1969): 575.

6. See Ogbu Kalu, "Introduction: The Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography," in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu Kalu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 13.

7. Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* [Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace; November 19, 2011] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011; www.vatican.va.) §13 (hereinafter *AM*).

8. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* [Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission toward the Year 2000; September 14, 1995] (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995; www.vatican.va.) §6 (hereinafter *EA*).

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experiencing what we call a sign of the times, an acceptable time, a day of salvation. It seems that the ‘hour of Africa’ has come, a favorable time.” These expressions—“Spiritual lung,” “Spiritual Capital of the world,” “new center of gravity of World Christianity,” “historical moment of grace,” “a sign of the times,” “an acceptable time,” “creative Africa,” “rich Africa,” “hour of Africa,” and “new home of Christ”—indicate the conviction that the Catholic Church in Africa has not only come of age but is also becoming a strong spiritual force in world Christianity in what has been called “the fourth great age of Christian expansion.”⁹

Joel Carpenter and Nellie Kooistra in *Engaging Africa* point out that “Christianity is one of the most dynamic forces on the African continent today. . . . The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian communion on the continent and is growing robustly in many nations, especially in Anglophone Africa, where it had no colonial privileges.”¹⁰ The Catholic Church in Africa, indeed, has experienced tremendous growth in recent times. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), based at Georgetown University, reports that the population of Catholics living in Africa grew from 59 million in 1980 to 199 million in 2012. The share of Catholics living in Africa grew from 7 percent of the world Catholic population in 1980 to 16 percent in 2012. Based on data from the official statistical reports released on June 1, 2015, CARA reports, “If current trends continue, by 2040 there will be about 460.4 million Catholics in Africa and African Catholicism will have more than 20% of the global Catholic population.”¹¹ What these statistics point to is that Africa is the continent witnessing the highest growth of Catholics in the world.¹² This means that, to a large extent, the future of global Catholicism will be shaped by what is happening

in Africa and that the Catholicism of the future will look more like Africa than Europe.

It is important to note, however, that scholars should not use these figures to paint an unduly rosy and triumphalist picture of African Catholicism. There is the need for caution and a critical reading of these data. This is because most demographic data on African Catholic population growth do not distinguish what may simply be a numerical growth of the entire population (with Catholic adherents remaining stable, and growing in some countries of Africa and declining in some other countries), from actual gains in the number of people who are converting to Catholicism. Similarly, the increased proportion of African Catholics in world Catholicism may be because of actual growth in African population, or in declining population in North America and Europe and elsewhere in the world, or a combination of other factors.

These statistics also fail to take into account the fact that the exponential growth in Catholic population in the post-Vatican II African church has not been the result of active evangelization or conversion of people from other religions or denominations to Catholicism, as was the case in the Western missionary phase of African Catholicism. The current growth has been more genetic, internal, or genealogical—meaning that African Catholic parents raise their children Catholic and insist on maintaining and handing on the Catholic faith as a family tradition to successive generations. The Catholic churches in African countries like DRC, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana, to give a few examples, just as in Brazil and in the Philippines, are losing a significant number of their population, especially the younger generation, to evangelicals and Pentecostals—a fact often lost in these statistics on church growth generated from outside of Africa.

9. John D. Y. Peel, “The Christianization of African Society,” in *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. E. Fasholé-Luke et al. (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 445. See also David Maxwell, “Review Article: New Perspectives on the History of African Christianity,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23.1 (March 1997): 181.

10. Joel Carpenter, and Nellie Kooistra, *Engaging Africa: Prospects for Project Funding in Selected Fields* (Grand Rapids, MI: Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity, 2015), 13.

11. Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Global Catholicism: Trends and Forecasts*, June 4, 2015 (Washington, DC: CARA, Georgetown University), 25–26.

12. See Pew Research Center’s Report, “Global Catholic Population” (2013), <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>.

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Furthermore, this demographic prognosis is predicated on a continuation of current sociological trends. It is, however, worth noting that the Christian mission has historically shown many unpredictable trends that defy mere sociological facts in terms of its survival in particular contexts and its geographical expansion. This fact is evident to most African Christian historians, who know that the African church fathers of the first five hundred years (CE) would not recognize the Islamic religious landscape of North Africa and Egypt today, judging from the expansive growth of the Christian faith in these territories in the first five centuries. The African church father Tertullian sang the praises of Christian expansion in North Africa in the third century CE in these words, “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum” (*Apologeticus* 37). A more recent example is the prediction made at the beginning of the twentieth century that it was going to be “the Christian century.” According to Brian Stanley, “as the twentieth century dawned, many Christians anticipated that the coming decades would witness the birth of a new era. Their expectation was that the accelerating global diffusion of Christianity from its Western heartlands to the rest of the globe will usher in the final phase of human history—the climactic millennial age of international peace and harmony.”¹³ The project of bringing about the Christian century was to be marked by intense Western missionary activities to the non-Western world, to convert the rest of the world to Western Christianity. The World Missionary Congress of 1910 was convoked to plan the strategies to achieve the “evangelization of the world in this generation” by European churches.¹⁴

But alas, Christianity, which began the twentieth century as a Western religion, by the end of that century had become a post-Western religion. Given the unpredictable patterns in Christian expansion, scholars must go beyond the binaries of Western

contraction and non-Western expansion in world Christianity today to a more expansive cross-cultural and theological interpretation. Merely sociological explanations of these shifts will not suffice. We need theological attention to the work of the Holy Spirit and the gospel’s own inherent thrust to grow. Nonetheless, it is notable that the momentum of Christian expansion in some parts of the world and its contraction in others have continued to drive some of the contending narratives of modernity beyond the twentieth century in the following areas: mission and conversion; religion and politics (the relationship between church and state); church and development; interreligious conflicts, religious persecution and violence; Christianity and genocide, racism, and war; reproductive rights, capital punishment, social justice, marriage, and family life; gender issues, ecumenism; women in ministry; same-sex marriages; and immigration.

The truth is that we humans cannot say with certainty how the Christian mission will actually unfold or how it will look in the coming decades and centuries. However, faith leads us to believe that there is a movement of the Spirit in world history. Each of us must play our own part by cooperating with God’s grace in making the ambiguities, complexities, and contradictions of present history conform to God’s will. This is one way we can bear prophetic witness in the world and thus help bring about the conditions for a new heaven and a new earth of cosmic flourishing in collaboration with people of other faiths and traditions.

In this light, while African Christians are embracing the gospel message with so much enthusiasm, it is also important for us as Africans to listen to what the Spirit is saying to Africa and the world through the reinvention of Christianity in Africa. Particularly of interest for scholars and leaders in today’s African Christian communities is the challenge of translating the exuberant faith in Africa into authentic and prophetic witness. This is an urgent mission for today’s Africa. The realities and experiences of faith and life mediated through

13. Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 1.

14. Brian Stanley, “Africa through European Christian Eyes: The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910,” in *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 116–80.

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the churches in Africa must become a concrete manifestation and realization of integral salvation for God's people in Africa. This is one way through which African Christianity can become Good News proclaimed to the rest of the world on the positive impact of the Christian message, rather than the constant cries of distress for aid and help by millions of our brothers and sisters who are hanging on the cross. African Catholic churches are invited to work critically and consciously to build on the assets and enthusiastic faith of African peoples. This critical and creative function should be directed to translating and transforming the Christian tradition in Africa to serve the needs of Africa, while offering something new and fresh from Africa to the World Church.

There is a need for scholars to confront the contradictions facing Africa today of a continent with an exponential growth in Christian population, on one hand, and a continent with rising poverty, on the other hand. African Catholic scholars must face up to the paradox of a continent that Pope Francis calls the "spiritual capital" of the world, which sadly can also be referred to today as the capital of religious violence, terrorism, religious pathologies, superstition, manipulation through prosperity preachers, religious charlatans, and *pastorpreneurs*, and fragmentation of religious communities and African societies. The growing gap between (1) religious expressions and prophetic religious performance and (2) the sad reality of vibrant religious communities in crumbling, weak, and failing nation-states and fractured local communities is a painful complexity that must be addressed by African Christian scholarship. Many Africans long for "the dawn on high" to shine upon them from the long dark night of suffering, diseases, death, and exploitation. They wish to see in their daily reality and society the signs of the eschatological reign of God in their history. The enormous potentials of Africa in her growing Christian population, youth, human and natural resources, resilient local communities, and women's leadership can be valorized by the church, political actors, and other stakeholders in the continent to bring about a society that

reflects the finest values and virtues and dreams of our people.¹⁵

In order for the Catholic Church in Africa to play a transformative role in meeting the present challenges and opportunities in Africa in a post-COVID-19 world, African local churches, scholars, church leaders, and everyday African Catholics need the space for creative freedom and local agency. This creative freedom will potentiate African local and cultural resources in birthing unique narratives of faith and life and specific forms of prophetic and transformative social engagement to meet the persistent social, spiritual, and political challenges that are features of the so-called African predicament. Creative freedom and local agency will, similarly, strengthen collaborative and mutually respectful partnership among African churches, academies, and social and religious actors in Africa and other traditions outside Africa in reinventing the future on some solid institutional structures, daily practices, and life-giving ecclesial culture.

How the Idea of the *Handbook* Was Born

This *Handbook* fulfills a key aspect of the African Catholicism Project launched by the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, USA, in 2015. The ACP is a collaborative partnership between African Catholic scholars and church leaders, and scholars and professors at CWCIT working with other Catholic scholars in North America and Europe, and frontline social actors, theologians, and churches in the Global South. The partnership was designed to create a capacious space for North-South dialogue in the African Catholic academy. Reports from CWCIT partners in African universities and African scholars in Europe and North America indicate that the church's universities and Catholic scholars in Africa continue to struggle, as scholarly and pastoral resources remain concentrated mainly in the North. The ACP is an international collaborative effort with the overarching goal of expanding the production and distribution

15. Cf. World Bank, *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* (Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction, 2000), 12.

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of scholarly and pastoral resources. Among others, the ACP also identifies the following objectives: (1) to foster collaboration among Catholic scholars working in Africa and between scholars working in Africa and those working in the United States and Europe; (2) to support the work of African scholars teaching in under-resourced institutions in Africa; (3) to encourage interdisciplinary work among scholars studying African Catholicism; (4) to produce written resources, both in print and online, serving both the scholarly community and the pastoral needs of the Catholic Church in Africa; and (5) to ensure the continuity of African scholarship through the mentoring of the next generation of African Catholic scholars.

The ACP offers a forum for African Catholic scholars to collaborate in producing and disseminating significant works for the church and society. ACP has contributed to the formation of scholars in the African church by bringing together different generations of scholars, teachers, and pastoral workers to create academic resources, and by making these resources broadly available for use in both the academy and ministry. Through the ACP and in the process of producing this *Handbook*, CWCIT facilitated three international collaborations between Catholic scholars who are based in Africa and those who reside within Western institutions of higher education and scholarship: in Enugu, Nigeria (December 2015); Nairobi, Kenya (July 2017); and again in Enugu, Nigeria (December 2019).

There is the realization based on this partnership that greater access to library holdings, experts, research funding, and other resources among African scholars will result in measurable increases in the volume and quality of research and pastoral literature that is published. Such partnerships will also increase the overall capacity of African Catholic scholars to carry out an ambitious research and education agenda on behalf of the church in Africa. Altogether, the project supports the growth of African Catholicism with relevant scholarship that accounts for, documents, sustains, and creatively

engages the themes and issues that are emerging in African Catholicism. The *Handbook* is the culmination of this effort and is positioned to be one of the most significant and important research resources in the African Catholic Church ever to appear in English or any other language. The hope is that the *Handbook* will fill serious gaps in scholarship in African Catholicism and thus provide for the academy in Africa and in the World Church an important interdisciplinary reference work for studying African Catholicism in its broadest sense.

Telling Our Own Story of What God Has Done for Us

This *Handbook* is an attempt to tell the story of African Catholicism through the lens of Africans themselves in conversation with many scholars from outside Africa, and in collaboration with many universities and other institutions throughout the world. Contributors retrace the redemptive pathway through which the mission of God in Africa began with our ancestors from the beginning of creation and which continues in diverse and dynamic ways today.¹⁶ This effort is thus an attempt to reread this history, while retrieving our African spiritual and theological heritage from the limiting narratives that have often portrayed African Christianity as an appendage to the mission of the Roman Catholic Church or a reproductive prototype of Western Christendom. Many African theologians underscore the importance of a historical turn in African Christian scholarship. For instance, Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues,

We cannot expect those who cannot tell their story, who do not know where they come from, to hear God's call to his future. We cannot expect a people "without a history" to respond as responsible human beings living in Africa. If their story is the same as the story of those who live in Europe and America, then they can only echo Euro-American responses.¹⁷

16. See Albert Nolan, *Hope in an Age of Despair: And Other Talks and Writings*, ed. Stan Muyebe (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 19.

17. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 54.

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The *Handbook* is thus an attempt at a liberative historiography—a conscious attempt to tell the story of African Catholicism through a different lens and beyond institutional narratives by giving voice and valence to African agency. This, it is hoped, will be a helpful corrective to some of the partial accounts that have been written in the past.

The need for a liberative historiography in telling the story of Catholicism in Africa cannot be overemphasized. Whenever one hears of mainstream ideas, standard practice, educational models, theological method, research methodology, a distinctive Catholic identity, and unchanging truth, it is important to realize that these are not disinterested claims. Africa still develops her educational systems, contents, and curricula in the Christian academy through a mainstreaming of knowledge and an epistemological framework embedded in the dominant cultural narratives of the West. Indeed, there is a confluence of cultural and historical factors as well as power dynamics that play important roles in the claims people make even in the social and experimental sciences. This is also true in religious studies and in theological accounts of history and theological and ecclesial traditions.

One needs to draw attention to the fact that knowledge, in this case religious knowledge and theological productions, inhabits the domain of power and interests. As a result, those who are able to control knowledge production and dissemination often control the minds of people as well as the kind of history that is told. This has become even more challenging today because of the limitations in documenting the funds of knowledge and knowledge production in Africa, given the digital divide and social media. In addition, research methods and scholarly paradigms on documentation of knowledge, for example, and religious codes and laws often make it difficult for historically dominated peoples to produce their own knowledge, and to tell their own stories, without defaulting to these dominant structures and systems that are the academic legal tender in scholarly circulation in the world. Thus, telling the African stories and documenting the African Catholic heritage in this *Handbook* is an effort to produce a different kind of narrative and resources for Africa

and the world that, we hope, will inspire scholars and the general reader to a better appreciation and understanding of the diversity, beauty, resilience, dynamism, challenges, and possibilities of the African Catholic heritage in shaping the future of the Christian mission in Africa and the world.

The *Handbook* chapters show that African Catholic scholarship is transgressing Northern epistemological hegemony. Contributors apply some new methodologies being developed by African Catholic scholars in transmitting Catholic intellectual traditions and the Christian traditions more broadly in Africa. Particularly significant is a conscious attempt to show that the church is a historical subject. Thus, the normativity of institutional history, and particularly the false insistence on an uncritical acceptance of the unity of human knowledge and a distinctive Eurocentric Catholic identity and culture, are being contested by some of the contributors to this volume. This attempt to see all reality and all knowledge as one and the perennial default to the universals pose significant obstacles to finding and appreciating new forms of knowing. We need to hear the suppressed voices within our churches and be open and enthusiastic about the new approaches to the craft of theology, just to give one example. There is a need to embrace in the World Church different experiences of Catholicism and different ways of knowing and of conducting theological or scientific inquiries.

Catholicism as a global religion is best served when the culture of encounter moves us all toward a joyful embrace of different worldviews, new epistemologies, local knowledge, contextual theology, and context-sensitive pedagogy in the one church of God. What this means is that there are important developments in world Christianity and in Africa and in the Global South that invite all discerning Christians to embrace the endless quest of stretching human knowing and thinking to roads less traveled outside the West. Indeed, the future of Christianity and the world will depend on finding a Catholic center in all things. In the face of the ideologies of power and interests that have polarized the church and our world, the new centers of Catholicism in Africa are offering a depolarizing space to encounter the God of surprises at the Catholic center, understood not as the spatial center of Rome

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but rather the movement to the heart of the Trinity, where all things are held together in love.

However, the battle for the truth and the right faith and the right conduct has continued in the moral and spiritual polarization today in the World Church and the schismatic binaries in local and global politics. In many instances, these battles have made it impossible for deeper encounter with God—beyond the idols of religion, empires, cultures, money, politics, race, and other narrow constructions of identity, social hierarchies, and the social construction of belonging and exclusion in the world.

People often pursue their cultural appropriation of the truth, faith, and identity in an absolute way. Sadly, some of these ideological, cultural, and sociological constructs are often imposed on others as a universal and absolute image of God or truth along the course of Christian history. For us Africans, we are appropriating and celebrating the truths of the Christian faith as our own, and we are unapologetically bringing our own truths and reality into dialogue with the Christian truth claims and assuming ownership of the Christian faith and the Gospel message as a rich tradition that has deep roots in Africa. However, this claim is inclusive because it highlights the rich experience and narrative of the impact of the gospel among African peoples and the shared faith with our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world within the common traits of our Christian and global family.

When we first designed this *Handbook* project in 2016, we were also aware of some disagreements about how to write African Christian history. The question of periodization in African Christian history is taken up in some of the chapters in the *Handbook*, particularly by Paul Kollman in the third article of the volume. However, within the overall thematic structure of this *Handbook*, we have contemporized our research endeavors here from the end of the Second World War to Pope Francis, by concentrating on current themes around the Chris-

tianity that emerged in Africa after the missionary work of Western Christians in the continent. The first section of this *Handbook* deals exclusively with African church history, while the rest of the *Handbook* focuses on the developments in the Catholic Church in Africa since the end of the Second World War, the decolonization process in Africa, Vatican II, and post-Vatican II developments. The chapters thus deal with interpretative history rather than providing a chronological account of the selected themes.

Readers will see that the *Handbook* is a unique work of history because of the conscious attempt by contributors to give a historical background to the themes discussed in most of the chapters. But in doing this, we are also conscious of the divergence of meaning in terms of “African Christian history,” or the application of the descriptive terms “Africa,” “African Christianity,” “African church,” “church in Africa,” and “African Catholicism.”¹⁸ As Thomas Oden rightly noted in *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*, one must be conscious of a very narrow reading of modern Christian history when it comes to Africa, where often people think that Christianity in Africa was strictly imported from the North. Oden proposes that, whereas many modern African theologians and scholars of religion have fought to give voice to the narratives of faith in God in Africa “in African traditional religious patterns, motifs, rituals, and memories,” he thinks that the best weapon for African theologians is the ancient texts of African Christianity.¹⁹

Another African Christian historian, Elizabeth Isichei, argues differently on how to read early African Christian history. She contends that the Christianity in North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia in the first five hundred years and the Christianity in the Kongo and Warri kingdoms, in the West African coastal regions, and in the Zambezi valley, had waned, died, or remained in fragments, especially in Coptic and Ethiopian Christianities. In the

18. For more on the theological explication of the complexities involved in these distinctions, see Stan Chu Ilo, “African Ecclesiologies,” in *Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 615–38.

19. Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 25–26.

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light of this reasoning, there is the need for some intellectual humility in universalizing the marginal residues of the Christian influence of these epochs on today's Africa.²⁰ Thus, a romanticized African past must give way to the realization that today's African Christians need to demonstrate the claim of an unmediated successive connection to ancient African Christianity. The early African church of the first five hundred years should be a source of inspiration to African Christians today because it offers African scholars and leaders in a special way an exemplary model of what is possible in Africa. This is the kind of sentiment expressed by Pope Benedict XVI in a speech in Yaoundé, Cameroun:

Perhaps this century will permit, by God's grace, the rebirth on your continent, albeit surely in a new and different form, of the prestigious School of Alexandria. Why should we not hope that it could furnish today's Africans and the universal Church with great theologians and spiritual masters who could contribute to the sanctification of the inhabitants of this continent and of the whole Church?²¹

Whereas African Christians should take pride in the glories of the past history of the growth and contribution of African Christianity in the development of Christian doctrines and church structures, I argue that an uninterrupted, diffusionist account of African Christianity is simplistic. Without taking account of cultural mediation, variations, displacements, migrations, the emergence of Islam in Africa, and Western cultural erasures of African histories and religious traditions over a period of fourteen hundred years on the continent of Africa, one might end up producing an emotive history that papers over important disruptions and tragic

interruptions from outside Africa that continue to this day. This point, however, only helps readers to appreciate the antiquity of African Christianity.

Indeed, African theological engagement with African stories and histories hark back to the first century, when the Lord Jesus walked the African soil, and even further back to the ancestral past when God spoke to our fathers and mothers in many signs and languages and in shadows and images before the coming of Christianity in Africa. As Augustine of Hippo put it, "That which is called Christian religion existed among the ancients . . . from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh, at which time the true religion which already existed began to be called Christian" (*Retractationes* 1.13.3). Pope Benedict XVI also spoke in the same vein when he said, "In Jesus, some two thousand years ago, God himself brought salt and light to Africa. From that time on, the seed of his presence was buried deep within the hearts of the people of this dear continent, and it has blossomed gradually, beyond and within the vicissitudes of its human history."²² Many commentators have observed that, in African Christian religion, the Bible is the dynamic source for connecting both individuals and cultures to the very heart of the Triune God.²³ The goal of this *Handbook* is to leverage the variations in African Catholicism and to give a greater accent to a hermeneutic of multiplicity in this account beyond the often romanticized, univocal, and undifferentiated chronological, diffusionist, theological, and historical accounts.

The birth of modernity in Africa or rather the disruptions caused by modernity in Africa began with the introduction of Western Christianity, slavery, colonialism, and the emergence of nation-states in Africa. All these factors have created the so-called African predicament, which has held Africa down through multiple internal and exter-

20. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1995), 2.

21. Pope Benedict XVI, address to Members of the Special Council for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (Yaoundé, March 19, 2009); AAS 101 (2009): 312.

22. Pope Benedict XVI, address to Members of the Special Council for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (Yaoundé, March 19, 2009); AAS 101 (2009): 310.

23. See, for instance, Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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nal forces of history. The convergence theory of global history is proving to be a will-o'-the-wisp for Africa and is creating greater stress than ever on all fronts. This view is shared by a majority of African scholars, especially those who embrace post-colonial critical social theories of history in writing African Christian history. This is well represented in the words of Ogbu Kalu: "Of all these bearers of the African burden, the missionary was also paradoxically, the best symbol of the colonial enterprise. He devoted himself sincerely to the ideals of colonialisms: the expansion of civilization, the dissemination of Christianity, and the advance of progress."²⁴ However, Elizabeth A. Foster in *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* makes a more nuanced argument regarding Africa and modernity before and after Vatican II. She demonstrates with newly discovered materials that, by the middle of the twentieth century, there was an internal tension between the Vatican and some French missionaries who were inspired by the spirit of Archbishop Lefebvre, who was the pope's vicar for Franco-Africa on the direction of the Catholic mission with regard to modernity in Africa. Whereas most of the French missionaries wanted a greater convergence of the emerging "Franco-African Catholic world" forged by conquest, colonization, missions, and conversions, and knit together by Catholic faith, Catholic education, Catholic press, and Catholic charities to the Metropole, the Vatican was open to reconciling Catholicism with African culture and modernity. This threatened to unhinge the direction of history favored in France, whose mainstream missionaries saw Africa as the extension of the French version of Catholicism. The Vatican, on the other hand, had its own version of modernity in Africa, which was opposed to continuing the "civilizing mission" in Africa, that is, opposed to maintaining the firm relationship of Franco-African Catholicism to the Western heritage.²⁵ The contestations about different versions of modernity that were implemented

by different European nations in Africa are open questions beyond this survey. This *Handbook*, however, is an effort to account for how African Catholic traditions and communities are grappling with the contested notions, projects, and designs of modernity as appropriated through the openness of the Second Vatican Council to cultural diversity and the impetus to contextual histories and ecclesiologies in the Roman Catholic tradition.

The *Handbook*: A Continuing Account of Africa's Reception of Vatican II

One of the ways in which the mothers and fathers of the First African Synod desired to promote the reception of Vatican II was in highlighting the need to make the faith in Africa intelligible. Their proposal was the pathway of inculturation, which aims at transmitting the faith and life of African peoples through an African cultural grammar and African religio-cultural traditions in regard to beliefs and practices, liturgy, morality, and spirituality. In doing this, they also recognized the changes in the movement of the Spirit in the momentum of Christian expansion in Africa (*EA* §8). Particularly significant here is the desire of the synod fathers and mothers to seek ways of integrating faith and life in Africa, through what Pope John Paul II calls an "organic pastoral solidarity" (*EA* §§5, 21).

The Second African Synod, on the other hand, was concerned with realizing the prophetic function of the church, as advanced in Vatican II's call for the church to read and respond to the signs of the times. Thus, whereas the First African Synod dealt with issues of fundamental theology and pastoral life, using the ecclesiological image of the Church as the family of God, the Second African Synod dealt with the same concerns using the ecclesiological image of the Church as salt and light. It embraced this image programmatically, from the perspective of prophetic social ministry. Both the First and Second African Synods called for the

24. Olufemi Taiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 52.

25. Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 7.

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development of an African theology (*EA* §103; *AM* §136) that will make possible the scientific study of African culture, so that the Christian faith can shed light on African society through Africa's own unique pastoral plan, social praxis, and intellectual heritage. Both synods dealt with issues of culture, communication, dialogue, justice and peace, mission, and ecclesiology and evangelization. Both also encouraged the use of all the gifts of all the members of the church—especially the genius of women, whom the Second Synod called the “backbone” (*AM* §58) of the church—to serve the cause of the gospel in Africa. Both were synods of hope, affirming as they did that the church in Africa must assume agency for her own life. She is called to play an active role in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation in Africa, as both a missionary church and a mission church (*EA* §29).

Building on the themes of the African synods and on the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council, the chapters in this *Handbook* offer an account of Africa's reception of Vatican II through the two African synods, the writings of theologians and other church scholars, the evolving methodologies being developed, and the development of themes within a particular field. The essays were produced through a cohort-based African palaver method that lasted for two years, in which each essay went through a rigorous review process through a communal process of correction, revision, and updating. This unique collaborative approach involving cohort-based research support, peer review, and peer learning makes this work a product of a community of learners; in a sense one can say that “we did it together.”

Each chapter tells a story—how the theme or issue discussed has developed historically. Then, the contributor examines the methodologies developing in the field and proceeds to “excavate” the data and the range of issues within the church and society around the themes or history under study. The contributor then maps the development of research in that particular field and possible new pathways, while attempting to explore some of the cross-disciplinary connections that are opening in different areas of research, pastoral practice, and other fields outside ecclesiastical studies. All the

contributors are leading African Catholic scholars, church leaders, and practitioners. They have worked hard collaboratively over a period of three years to produce works of significant quality, depth, and range.

Themes Covered in the *Handbook*

The themes and topics presented in this *Handbook* are deliberately chosen to reflect the themes, topics, issues, and research interests that have emerged in African Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council. These issues have been articulated in different ways by African theologians, Catholic scholars, social theorists, local church leaders, and everyday Catholics. Some of these issues are not being sufficiently addressed in the Catholic Church in Africa today. In some instances, the African scholars talking about them are not in conversation with one another because of language barriers or the lack of documentary and transferable data. In this *Handbook*, these issues have been thoroughly studied, debated, and developed through the African palaver among a broad range of African and Western conversation partners.

The *Handbook* is divided into five sections according to five broad areas. These five broad areas were chosen to reflect the themes and subjects of the two African synods and the programmatic plan for evangelization in this third millennium from Pope Paul VI to Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium*, namely: (1) the history and mission of African Catholicism; (2) formation, education, and communication in African Catholicism; (3) church and society in Africa; (4) morality/spirituality, health, and healing; and (5) Catholic intellectual traditions in Africa in the areas of theological and philosophical studies. This *Handbook* was designed to transgress disciplinary silos. This is why the contributors employ an interdisciplinary approach in their research and in the development of their chapters. The *Handbook* is thus structured to address different audiences, because in researching and writing on these five themes contributors have integrated multiple perspectives, methodologies, and approaches to harvesting and accounting for the development of African Catholic intellectual traditions.

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How to Use the *Handbook*

It is hoped that this *Handbook* can be an aid to scholars, students, practitioners, and the general interest reader studying African Catholicism and the significant momentum of Christian expansion and influence in the continent. We suggest four approaches to reading this work among others that readers might choose.

First, it should be read as *a narrative of hope and a pedagogy of agency*. The chapters tell the story of hope by connecting the African past to the present and providing some blueprints of how the future might unfold. This is a particularly important approach to African studies in general, especially given the negative framing of Africa that could make one lose hope. Indeed, Afro-pessimism is a present temptation for many, given the persistent challenges facing Africa and the suffering of God's people in Africa. Afro-pessimism has its roots in White supremacy and racism, the deficit characterization of African culture, and the general sentiments that Africa's political and religious institutions are retrogressive, leading to the lack of faith in a better future for Africa. However, these sad realities are signs that the continent is still searching for new pathways and new roads to a future, hence the need for moderation of our anger and our pessimism and the need to translate this anger and these negative sentiments into a veritable tool and praxis for reversal. In reading the chapters of the *Handbook*, we hope that readers can appreciate the many significant developments in the past that can serve as an inspiration for us to set out again and put into the deep every new day in the hope that each of us can contribute something to build up the city of God in our continent and in the world.

The second approach is *critical Afrocentric realism away from the popular claim in the World Church that Africa is the new center of gravity for world Christianity*. Readers are invited to read this *Handbook* as a field manual for action on translating faith into action, hope, and enthusiastic faith claims into spiritual agency for changing Africa from this cycle of suffering and pain to a cycle of abundant life and human flourishing. This approach is against one of unrealistic romantic optimism of a better future for

Africa through devotions, prosperity gospel, and church growth without taking the time to do the heavy lifting of looking at Africa's past and present history and social conditions and how they have weakened critical, creative, and transformative thinking, knowledge production, and education in Africa. This approach invites readers to critically engage the religious, social, and political institutions, systems, structures, and cultural traditions in Africa and ask the simple question: Is this particular institution generating the kind of knowledge, transformative ethics, and praxis that can bring human flourishing in these rich lands?

Third, the *Handbook* offers *a total-picture approach model in studying African history from the lens of Catholicism*. This approach is analogous to the *nexus mysteriorum*, a principle in Catholic theology that says that, in explicating a particular Christian doctrine, one will inevitably shed light on other doctrines because all the mysteries of faith are intimately connected. The same thing applies here in writing about African Catholic history—there is an organic synthesis to each chapter and an inner connection to all the chapters. The total-picture approach method proposes that we cannot study any reality today in Africa without establishing its linkage to the bigger historical picture of the continent. Every reality in African studies that we study reveals significant insights about other aspects of African history. Therefore, one cannot simply dismiss any African solution without seeing it in its historical and interconnected contexts or interpret Africa through a single narrative. The challenge today for many Africans is that we are often represented in the contemporary world by one thing or another—usually a single narrative, or we sometimes represent present African conditions as originating from a single causative factor. Readers of the *Handbook* are thus invited to this organic and total picture that can be gained by reading each chapter. This is why the chapters are interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary in nature.

Fourth and finally, the *Handbook* is *the product of a community of scholars and a community of practice*. The hope is that the *Handbook* will attract also a *community of readers and conversation partners in colleges, dioceses, formation houses, and third-sector researchers in Africa and outside*

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of Africa. What the production of this *Handbook* shows ultimately is a model of how Africans can work together among themselves and with others to do the work of God. Africa's rich harvest of faith and exciting social realities cannot be understood through a single theological method or through the account of one scholar, teacher, or church leader; it has to be accounted for by a network, a coming

together of scholars and practitioners. But Africa is also best served when her scholars and leaders are working not only among themselves but with other scholars and leaders in every part of the world. This is the wisdom of the spider's web, an ancient wisdom on solidarity, patience, and teamwork left for us by our African ancestors—"When spider webs unite, they can tie a lion."