

TANGAZA COLLEGE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA

***VENERATION OF ANCESTORS AS A VITAL
ELEMENT OF AFRICAN TRADITION RELIGION AND
THE POSSIBILITIES OF ITS INCULTURATION IN THE
CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AFRICA.***

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I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to all those whom I have met during my journey towards priesthood in the Society of African Missions.

I pay my tribute to my family, all my friends and especially to Agata, Malgorzata, Jadwiga and Fr Andrzej Krajewski.

I dedicate it also to all the SMA Fathers who worked in Africa and whose example has been an encouragement for me to become interested in African Traditional Religion.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In 1842, at the end of his retreat, before leaving for India, Marion Brésillac, the future founder of the Society of African Missions wrote several ideas that were to be his guidelines for mission. In his diary he noted:

“Here are the special resolutions I made at the end of the retreat:

1. To be a missionary with all my heart.
2. To neglect nothing for the advancement of God’s work.
3. To seize every opportunity of preaching God’s word.
4. To use every means I have - all my strength, all my study and effort - to contribute towards the formation of a native clergy”¹.

These words have been a point of reference for hundreds of SMA missionaries who following the example of our Founder, gave their lives in the service of people of African origin.

Today, almost 144 years after the foundation of our Society, I want to engage myself definitively in the service of the African Church, as a missionary, especially among those who have not yet heard about Jesus Christ.

The political, social, economic situation of contemporary Africa is a complicated one. It is within this context that I want to go to proclaim the Good News of salvation of Jesus Christ.

My 9 years of formation helped me to find my own answer to the question ‘Why do I want to spread the Gospel in Africa’. However, as good as this answer may be, I am convinced that it is not enough to be relevant to people among whom I am going to work.

The basic question I have to find answer to, in line with the charism of SMA and my

¹Brésillac, Marion, Souvenirs. Memories from twelve years on the mission, Vol.1, Roma: Tipografica “Leberit”, 1987, p. 76.

personal gifts. is 'How', by what means, I am to do so as to be relevant to people having their own, highly structured culture'.

This work is an attempt to give answer to this question. It is also an attempt to present a particular way in which the second and the third resolution of Marion Brésillac, mentioned above are understood by me in the present situation of Africa.

To proclaim the Gospel among those who have not yet heard about Jesus Christ and have their own culture and religion, it is necessary to know the position of the Catholic Church concerning other religions and their relationship to Christ. For this reason, the first chapter deals with this issue.

Further in the first chapter, after having looked at the position of the Church towards world religions with a special attention to African Traditional Religion, we will present the process of inculturation as the most appropriate way of proclaiming Jesus Christ in the contemporary Africa.

People in Africa have very rich cultures, with their particular religious background. This culture is very different from my native Polish culture. It is distinct to such an extent that I find it indispensable to be well acquainted with this culture before starting my ministry. That is the reason for choosing such an approach in the second chapter.

It would be impossible to look at all elements of African culture and religion. That is why I have chosen to look at the notion of ancestors in African Traditional Religion. There are basically two reasons for this choice: ancestors play a very important role in Africa and they have a special place in the pyramid of life. Because of this special place, some other elements of African Traditional Religion are going to be mentioned.

The process of inculturation is not an easy one and usually requires a deep theological knowledge of Christianity and of local customs. These are the reasons for looking at the ways in

which others considered the process of inculturation of ancestor veneration.

The second part of the third chapter deals with my personal proposals how to use this veneration in the practical situation of the proclamation of the Gospel in Africa at the beginning of the XXI century.

The Christian approach to African Traditional Religion as presented above, seems to be well grounded in the Gospel and in the contemporary teaching of the Church. It is, basically, an approach of openness, of respect and of humility. We are aware that we do not 'bring God' from outside, but we try to discover his presence in African religious beliefs.

This approach helps to achieve two things. First, we carry on the process of evangelisation as Jesus Christ asked us to do (cf., Mt 28: 19-20). Secondly, it allows us to deepen our own faith and understanding of God's action in the world. Looking at the mysterious ways in which God is to be found in ancestor veneration of African people, we can only stand in awe and repeat the words of the psalmist:

"Shout joyfully to God, all you on earth,
sing his glorious name;
give him glorious praise.

Say to God: 'How awesome your deeds!
Before your great strength your enemies cringe.
All on earth fall in worship before you;
they sing of you, sing your name!' (Ps 66: 2-4).

CHAPTER I.

THE MODERN APPROACH OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TOWARDS WORLD RELIGIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first part of the chapter we present the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning non-Christian religions. We concentrate mainly on Vatican II and subsequent teaching which are the most relevant for our study.

It is not our intention to justify the position of the Church² towards other religions. We demonstrate only some elements of that extensive teaching.

In the second part of the chapter we will concentrate on the uniqueness of the Catholic Church vis-a-vis world religions.

The third part of the chapter concentrates on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning African Traditional Religion (ATR).

2. THE PRE-VATICAN II APPROACH.

At the threshold of and in the years surrounding Vatican II, there were two main theological views concerning the relationship between world religions and Christianity. Both of them affirmed the possibility of salvation for those outside the Church³. These are: *the Fulfilment*

²In this work, when we talk about 'the Church' we mean 'the Catholic Church' unless specified otherwise. The notions of 'non-Christian religions', 'world religions' and 'other religions' are used interchangeably. We are aware of the differences in connotation.

³Cf., Dupuis, Jacques, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998, p. 158.

Theory and the theory of the Presence of the Mystery of Christ.

The Fulfilment Theory saw other religions as a preparation for the Gospel. As beneficial as these were before the Christ-event, they lost their importance and their role with the advent of Christianity. Christianity is seen as their fulfilment, putting an end to their positive, yet only provisional role. When faced with Christianity, other religions do not have a salvific role to play. The world religions were described as having “their arms stretched out towards heaven” (EN 53); whereas our religion (Christianity) effectively establishes with God an authentic and living relationship which the other religions do not succeed in doing (cf., EN 53).

The theory of the *Presence of the Mystery of Christ* stressed the fact that the religions retained their value for their followers until the time when the Good News would be essentially promulgated to each person. It means that after the Christ-event the world religions remain the context in which God offers salvation in Christ to their adherents. As a result, the world religions have some kind of ‘salvific value’⁴ because they are the means used by God to extend his salvation to others⁵.

⁴By this statement we mean that other religions may be ways used by Jesus Christ to bring salvation to their followers. Their ‘salvific value’ is drawn from the salvific will of “God our Saviour who wills everyone to be saved...” (1Tim 2:4).

For further information about the attitude of the Church toward other cultures at the beginning of the 20th century, refer to: Shorter, Aylward, Toward a theology of inculturation, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988, p. 179-190.

⁵Cf., Domingues, Fernando, “Christian Theology of Other Religions”, class-notes, 1999-2000, p. 61-62.

3. VATICAN II

It has to be noted that Vatican II was the first ecumenical council to speak of other religions in a positive tone⁶. We will take into consideration the teaching of that Council looking at the possibility of salvation outside the Church, and the positive elements found in other religions.

A. Salvation outside the Church⁷.

Vatican II clearly stated the possibility of salvation for those who are not Christians. In *Lumen Gentium*, in the section concerned with the relationship of different groups to the Church, we read: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience - those too may achieve eternal salvation" (LG 17). This quotation expresses clearly the positive attitude of the Church towards members of other religions. One's salvation depends, primarily, on the process of following one's conscience, rather than on being a member of a given religion.

The Council Fathers stressed not only the fact that the salvation is possible for those who are not Christians; they went further in their positive outlook on other religions. They stressed that the plan of God is carried out, not only in the life of the individuals but also in and through

⁶Cf., Dupuis, Jacques, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 136.

In Hastings, Adrian, ed., *Modern Catholicism. Vatican II and after*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 185, we read that "the Secretariat for Non-Christians, now known as the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was founded by Paul VI in May 1964. It was clearly a fruit of the Vat II Council. Its *raison d'être* was to be a sign of the Church's concern for the spiritual needs all humanity and a means of dialogue with other believers in God, as well as with all people of good will."

⁷To discuss this topic in depth would entail a lot of details which are not relevant to this work as a whole. Another problem that would have to be faced would be the different theological interpretations of the statements of the Vatican II. We would like to present a few statements which directly or by implication point to the possibility of salvation of those outside the Church - including members of the world religions.

some religious efforts. The *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity*, n. 3 underlines that "the universal plan of God for salvation of mankind is not carried out solely in a secret manner, as it were, in the minds of men, nor by the efforts, even religious, through which they in many ways seek God in attempt to touch him and find him, although God is not far from any of us".

According to Vat II, there is a possibility of salvation for the members of other religions.⁸ These religions, or at least, some of their elements, were looked upon positively, because the Council Fathers considered them as means through which the salvific will of God was revealed to them.

B. The authentic values found in non-Christian religious traditions.

Nostra Aetate gives a positive evaluation of these religions and has due respect for them.⁹ The declaration stresses that all people form one community because of the unity of origin-creation and the unity of destiny-redemption. God's saving activity extends to all people (cf., NA 1). Looking to different religions for answers to the most fundamental questions, people came to "certain awareness of a hidden power and even to the recognition of a supreme being"(NA 2). Because of this awareness and recognition, the way of life of the followers of these religions has a deep, religious dimension (cf., NA 2).

Vatican II underlined the "elements of truth and grace which are found among peoples, and which are ...a secret presence of God" (AG 9). The Church recognises "whatever good is

⁸We do not develop this part further because the quotations provided by us are self-explanatory, and our deliberations would not add more except for what is already stressed there. Some other quotations which could be used at this point will be mentioned in the following paragraphs.

We find it necessary to underline that the Council does not explicitly say that the other religions can be ways of salvation for their members. However, Vat II "seems to incline in that direction and does set the positive elements of other traditions in relationship with the mystery of Christ" (Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter*, p. 158).

⁹Cf., Schlink, Edmund, *After the Council*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968, p. 126.

found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of people” (LG 17).

The Catholic Church acknowledges the values found in world religions. She “rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (NA 2). On the contrary, she accepts the positive elements, i.e. the manner of life, conduct, precepts, doctrine, found in them (cf., NA 2).

As we have seen, the documents of Vatican II put stress on many positive elements found in other religions. What has to be emphasised is the fact, that Vatican II acknowledged not only that elements of sanctification and truth are to be found outside the Church in individuals, but also that these elements are to be found in the religious systems as such. Religions are not only expressions of the search for valid answers to the most fundamental questions, but they are also, within certain limits, possessors of valid answers. The other religions contain some elements that are considered as true and a result of grace (cf., AG 9)¹⁰.

C. The position of the Church regarding values found in non-Christian religions.

The Church recognises great value in world religions. It is, however, not merely a simple recognition of a fact that has no connection with Christ. It is within the framework of Christ’s salvific activity that the role of other religions gets its proper understanding.

The Magisterium has always emphasised that “whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life” (LG 16). The positive elements of those religions are considered as “rays of that truth that illuminates all humankind” (NA 2) and Christians are called to recognise the initial presence of the Word (cf., AG11, 15) contained in other religious efforts.

¹⁰Cf., Schlink, After the Council, p. 129.

These positive elements are not simply the work of the human mind. They are the work of Christ. The Church claims that the positive elements have Christ for their author and that they constitute a hidden, secret presence of God (cf., AG 9)¹¹.

4. THE POST-CONCILIAR MAGISTERIUM¹².

A. The teaching of the Secretariat for Non-Christians.

According to the document *Towards the meeting of religions* the followers of other religions benefit from the universal Providence of God. They can count on the efficacious help of God, and hope for salvation. Referring to LG 16, TMR 2 stresses that grace is not limited to the visible confines of the Church, but also exists outside of them. Since God wants to save all people, and not all of them can know about the salvation offered by God in the person of Jesus Christ, he has to have some other ways of saving people. These ways are, however, always connected to the role of the Church.

The document affirms clearly that “God’s action reaches men in the very experiences of life and of their conscience...; divine grace ordains these men to take their place at the end of times among the People of God” (TMR 2).

¹¹The consequent teaching of the Magisterium develops the points mentioned above. We do not concentrate more on this point because it is not the goal of our work. A lot has been written about the unique role of Christ in the process of salvation. Within the context of our work, the best document dealing with this issue is *Redemptoris Missio*. The first chapter has as its title *Jesus Christ, the only Saviour*. A good, concise commentary to this chapter is found in Bellagamba, Anthony, The Mission of the Church. A commentary and reflection in the Encyclical Redemptoris Missio by Pope John Paul II, Nairobi: St Paul Publications Africa, 1993, p. 18-26.

¹²The great amount of available information that could be included in this section necessitates a choice of the approach that will concentrate on the teaching contained in Toward the Meeting of Religions (TMR) (September 21, 1967), The Attitude of the Church Towards Followers of Other Religions (May 10, 1984), both issued by the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians, in Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientation on Interreligious Dialogue and Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Sacred Congregation for Evangelization of People (May 19, 91) and on the teaching of John Paul II.

We present only some parts of these documents. Our reflection upon the content of these documents is restricted to the presentation of values acknowledged by the Catholic Church as being present in the world religions. We do not present their whole approach. That will be given later.

The Church recognises and considers praiseworthy “ the pursuit of the moral ideal, ... the sincere desire for perfection, ...zeal for the preservation of their spiritual heritage,...the way of self-purification,...docility toward the Supreme Good,... search for the Infinite” (TMR 2) that are to be found in other religions.

The document *The attitude of the Church toward the followers of other religions* emphasises that the Holy Spirit also works “outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body (n. 24) and that God never ceases to reconcile persons to himself by the work of his Spirit” (n. 41).

The document gives a summary of the teaching of the Vat. II (cf. n. 26) emphasising that among the religious non-Christian traditions “there exist ‘elements which are true and good’ (OT 16), ‘precious things both religious and human’ (GS 92), ‘seeds of contemplation’ (AG 18), ‘elements of truth and grace’ (AG 9),... and rays of truth which illuminate all mankind” (NA 2).

B. The teaching contained in Dialogue and Proclamation.

In the joint document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Sacred Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*¹³, there is a summary of the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning interreligious dialogue.

The document presents the relationship between the notions of ‘dialogue’ and ‘proclamation’ when applied to other religions. It places these notions within the framework of the saving activity of God. It also presents some elements of the theology of religions.

The underlining presupposition of this document is the fact that other religions have something valuable and true contained in them. Defining dialogue as those interreligious relations

¹³Joint document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Sacred Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, (May 19, 1991), “Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientation on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” In: Gioia, Francesco, ed., Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995), Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997, p. 608-642. This document will be referred to henceforth as DP.

which are geared towards mutual awareness and mutual enrichment (cf., DP 9), there is a clear indication of a positive approach of the Church towards other religions.

The document calls for a sensitivity in the process of meeting them, because they contain a great number of values that have helped people throughout the centuries to find answers to the most fundamental questions of life (cf., DP 14, NA 1).

Looking at salvation history, as it is described in the Old Testament, the document affirms that God's activity goes beyond the boundaries of Israel and touches other people, nations as well as individuals (cf., DP 20).

Jesus' life and ministry is seen from the point of view of his announcement of the Kingdom, which is not limited to the people of Jewish origin. Similar attitudes are shared by St Paul and some of the Fathers of the Church (cf., DP 22, 23, 24).

Dialogue and Proclamation emphasises also the role of the Church. She is the "universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48) and is, further, "necessary for salvation" (LG 14). It is through her, a sacrament of the presence of the Kingdom of God, that the members of other religions, in as much as they act following their conscience, may be saved in Jesus Christ (cf., DP 35). In the same point it is mentioned very clearly that one of the tasks of the Church is to recognise that the beginning reality of the Kingdom can also be found beyond her confines. However, this reality of the Kingdom of God being, somehow, present in the hearts of the followers of the other religions as long as they live according to the evangelical values and are open to the action of the Spirit, finds its completion through being related to the Christ's Kingdom already present in the Church (cf., DP 35).

C. The specific contribution of John Paul II.

Nostra Aetate stressed the notion of common origin of all people from God and the common destiny in God according to God's plan of salvation of humankind (cf., NA 1). No mention, however, was made about the connection of the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit among people. In his contribution to the theology of religions, John Paul II emphasises the presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of non-Christians and their religious traditions¹⁴.

In his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II speaks about the "firm belief of the followers of non-Christian religions that is an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body"(RH 6). Describing the action of the Spirit, the Pope states that He "blows where he wills" (Jn 3:8; RH 12).

In *Redemptoris Missio* John Paul II affirms that the Spirit's "presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time... The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history" (RM 28).

The Pope asserts also that "whenever the human spirit opens itself in prayer to... Unknown God, an echo will be heard of that Spirit who, knowing the limits and weaknesses of the human

¹⁴Cf., Dupuis, Toward a Christian Theology, p. 173.

We do not present here the theology of the Holy Spirit according to Vatican II. It is not the purpose of this paragraph. What is stressed here is the fact that in the main document of the Council dealing with the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, the word 'Holy Spirit' is not mentioned at all. For a short summary of the role of the Holy Spirit in connection with our topic, refer to: Dupuis, Jesus Christ at the Encounter, p. 157-162.

person, himself prays within is and for us..."¹⁵.

In his teaching John Paul II emphasises the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in non-Christian religions. The fruits of that presence and activity are: authentic prayer, human values and virtues, treasures of wisdom¹⁶.

5. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH VIS-A-VIS OTHER RELIGIONS

As we have already seen, the teaching of the Catholic Church recognises and appreciates the positive elements found in other religions.

The Church identifies and respects what is true and good (cf., LG 16) in these religions. However, she is also aware that not all the elements of these religions are good. The Church clearly points out that some of the components of other religions are the work of people under the influence of "the father of lies" (Jn 8:44). These people have been beguiled by him and have deliberately rejected the truth and followed a lie (cf., LG 16). That is why, the approach of Christians to other religions should not be completely affirmative.

Elements of the world religions are looked at from the point of view of reflecting the historical nature of human beings. Human beings were created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:27). In spite of this fact, they became sinful creatures (cf., Gen 3:1-19; Rom 3: 10-18)

¹⁵Cf., John Paul II, Message to the Peoples of Asia, Manila, February 21, 1981, In: Gioia, Francesco, ed., Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church, Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997, p. 239.

In Arinze, Francis, Meeting Other Religions, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997, p. 55, we find that "...whenever there is authentic prayer or love of others, we should believe that God is somehow at work there. It is not necessary for us to understand how God can give His gifts and His grace. The Spirit blows where He wills".

¹⁶Cf., Dupuis, Jesus Christ at the Encounter, p. 163.

We have presented only some elements of the teaching of John Paul II. The number of relevant documents issued by him is very extensive and can not be dealt exhaustively in this work.

that can be deceived. Human beings are under influence of these two forces: good and bad. Whatever they do wears marks of these two agencies. For that reason, not all elements found in other religions are praiseworthy and to be followed (cf., TMR 3). The efforts of people looking for God through other religions require some correction in the light of the Gospel (cf., AG3).

The non-Christian religions, though seen as having an important role to play in the history of humanity, are not on the same level as Christianity, because of the Gospel of Christ. It is a special message, not found in other religions, coming from God and announcing his salvation. (cf., TMR3)¹⁷.

The particularity of our religion can be based on the unique and ultimate revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Saviour of all humankind, and the only one able to reveal God and lead to Him (cf., RM 5). He, is the One who was sent by the Father to be our Mediator (cf., AG3). He is a true God and true Man. He is the One who is the way, the truth and the life (cf., Jn14: 6). Because of the unique, indispensable and vital role of Jesus Christ in the process of salvation “there is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12). It means that salvation comes only from Jesus Christ (cf., RM 5), and that He is the Mediator through whom this salvation is communicated and made attainable for us (cf., LG 14).

The role of the Holy Spirit is emphasised a lot in the teaching of the Magisterium. He is the One whose presence and activity are worldwide, and not limited by space or time. His

¹⁷ “Among errors against the Catholic Faith must be included the horrible system ...according to which there is no difference between religions...” (Pius IX, “Qui pluribus” In: Dupuis, Jacques, ed., The Christian Faith, 6th ed., Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1998, p. 385).

In the *Letter to the Bishops of Asia* (23 January, 1990) John Paul II wrote that “the fact that the followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people. It is a contradiction of the Gospel and of the Church’s very nature to assert, as some do, that the Church is only one way of salvation among many, and that her mission towards the followers of other religions should be nothing more than to help them to be better followers of those religions” (Dupuis, The Christian Faith, p. 415).

presence is to be found also in human hearts. That is why, whatever good is done by human beings, it is considered as the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the author of the existential questions human beings have been trying to find answers to throughout the centuries. The world religions are seen as attempts to give answers to these questions (cf., RM 27).

For that reason, the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit are the ones through which one may enter into communion with God the Father. It is exactly in the context of this framework, of God's saving activity through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, that the role of other religions is viewed. There may be some participated forms of mediation, but not independent from Christ and they acquire their value only from his mediation (cf., RM 5).

6. THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ABOUT AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION (ATR).

In the first part of the chapter we have presented the approach of the Catholic Church toward non-Christian religions. We have underlined some of her teachings which show great appreciation for some of the values, traditions and prayer-life of the members of these religions. All this 'positive' teaching applies also to the African Traditional Religion.

A. Vatican II and ATR.

The II Vatican Council was a watershed in its theological openness to the religious traditions and values of non-Christian religions. The Council mentioned four great religions of the world: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. There was no any explicit statement, during

Vatican II on ATR¹⁸. The Council taught that other religions which are found throughout the world, attempt in their own way to calm the hearts of men by outlining a program of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites. The Church recognises these values and does not discard them (cf., NA 2).

B. The teaching of Paul VI about the African culture and ATR.

The very first document that makes a clear mention of the religious tradition of the African people is *Africae Terrarum*¹⁹ of Pope Paul VI, issued of October 29, 1967. In this official document devoted entirely to Africa, Paul VI considers the African world view as a spiritual one having a basic unity between living beings, nature and the world of the invisible. In this view, as Paul VI puts it, man is not considered as completely limited to the earthly reality, but also has a spiritual dimension that points out to the after-life (cf., AT 8)²⁰.

Among other positive elements contained in the ATR, Paul VI stressed that some traditional customs and rites, considered as strange in the past, are now to be looked into because their moral and religious values deserve attentive consideration (cf., AT 7).

The great role of African traditions in the process of evangelisation has been summarised by Paul VI in the words: "The Church views with great respect the moral and religious values of the African tradition, not only because of their meaning, but also because she sees them as

¹⁸ "Bishops from Africa, and scholars of religion like Franziskus Cardinal Koenig, Archbishop of Vienna, asked that mention be made of a number of religions in Africa, etc. It was decided, however, to keep the traditional idea of the great religions in the world (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam), giving these explicit mention and referring to all the others in this general summary" ("Lumen Gentium", n. 2, footnote n. 9, in: Abbot, Walter, ed., The Documents of Vatican II, New York: Guild Press, 1966, p. 662).

¹⁹ Paul VI, "Africae Terrarum" in: Hickey, Raymond, ed., Modern Missionary Documents and Africa, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982, p. 176-197. This document will be referred to henceforth as AT.

²⁰ Cf., Hickey, Modern Missionary Documents, p. 179-180.

providential, as the basis for spreading the gospel message and beginning the establishment of the new society in Christ” (AT 14).

According to this statement, the Church, clearly sees, at least some African religious traditions as the basis for the proclamation of the Good News. These elements are not only supposed to be used, but they should be used because they are God-inspired.

This statement reflects the fact that the proclamation of the Gospel is not something coming from outside, but rather it consists, especially at the beginning, in the discovery of the presence of God in these traditions.

C. The teaching of John Paul II about the African culture and ATR.

John Paul II has consistently laid emphasis on the values of the African culture and of ATR²¹. In his address at Yamassoukro²², John Paul II called students to preserve their African roots and the values of their culture. Such values found in the African traditions like: family, respect for life, solidarity, the sense of hospitality are seen by the Pope as a treasure to be used and drawn from in the process of building a country. These values would help people to build a country based upon the harmony between the values of the past together with the elements of the modern civilisation (cf., Mt 15: 32).

²¹ “If Pope has ever involved himself so personally and deeply in the African reality, it is John Paul II. He has been loud in the praise of African culture and religious heritage. The numerous pastoral visits John Paul has made to Africa provided him with unique opportunities to impress upon his African hearers the high regard and respect the Church has for the African traditional cultural heritage, and how the should be brought into service of the Gospel and for the enrichment of the universal Church” (Bekye, Paul, “African Traditional Religion in Church Documents”, In: <http://isizoh.net/afrel/atrxadocs.htm>, p. 9, date: 00-07-16).

We have quoted just several from among many addresses of the Popes concerning the African culture.

²²Cf., John Paul II, “A speech to the students of Cote D’Ivoire, Yamoussoukro, 11 May 1980”, In: Popes speak on African Traditional Religion and Cultural Values, <http://isizoh.net/afrel/atr-popes.htm>, p. 5-6, date: 00-07-15.

In his speech to representatives of the Muslims of Cameroon. John Paul II called for an unceasing exploration of the praiseworthy elements of the traditions found in Africa. According to the Pope, all these traditional values have their place in the modern world. These values are some points of reference for the society, that may prevent it from becoming violent, solitary, sterile and, finally inhuman²³.

7. THE PROCESS OF EVANGELISATION AND INCULTURATION IN AFRICA.

While expressing loudly his appreciation of African culture, John Paul II is aware that his task as the Successor of Saint Peter is a task of evangelisation²⁴. He underlined that “the evangelisation of your culture is one of the great tasks which confront you in your ministry”²⁵.

The present Pope acknowledges that the Gospel is not to be identified with any specific culture because it transcends them all²⁶. The task of the Church is to bring Christ. It is not, as the Roman Pontiff puts strongly, to bring a culture of another race, in which the message of the Gospel has been already rooted²⁷.

John Paul II recognises and appreciates many elements of African culture. He repeats

²³Cf., John Paul II, “A speech to the representatives of the Muslims of Cameroon, Yaoundé, 12 August 1985”, In: Popes speak, p. 7.

²⁴It has been already mentioned that the Church has a positive approach to the non-Christian religions, though it is not an unconditioned approval.

John Paul II said to the Pontifical Council for Culture, January 15, 1985 that “we cannot not evangelise. Countless regions and cultural milieus remain unaware of the Good News of Jesus Christ ...” (Carrier, Hervé, Evangelising the Culture of Modernity, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993, p. 69).

²⁵John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Zimbabwe their ‘Ad Limina’ visit, Rome, 2 July 1988”, In: Popes speak, p.8.

²⁶Cf., John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Zaire, Kinshasa, 3 May, 1980”, In: Popes speak, p. 3.

²⁷Cf., John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Nigeria, Lagos, 15 February, 1982”, In: Popes speak, p. 6.

once more that “the Church truly respects the culture of each people. In offering the Gospel message, the Church does not intend to destroy or to abolish what is good and beautiful, in fact she recognises many cultural values...”²⁸

One of the aspects of evangelisation²⁹ is the inculturation of the Gospel³⁰. Inculturation can be described as “the incarnation of the Christian life and Christian message in a particular context in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and verifies the creation, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation’”³¹.

²⁸John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Nigeria, Lagos, 15 February, 1982”, In: Popes speak, p. 6. Some of these values have been mentioned above.

²⁹“The task of evangelising all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church ...Evangelising is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelise. Born of the evangelising mission of Jesus and the Twelve, she is in turn sent forth...The purpose of evangelisation is transforming humanity from within and making it new...” (John Paul II., The Church in Africa, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995, p. 41).

³⁰ A lot could be written about the notion of inculturation. In our particular case, we want to refer to the words of John Paul II about it. Using the words of Vat. II, he describes inculturation: “The Good News... takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation and with spiritual riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within: it fortifies, completes and restores them in Christ (GS 58). A genuine inculturation of faith cannot be reduced to merely adopting the externals of a given culture. True inculturation is born from within: it consists, ultimately, in a renewal of life under the influence of grace” (John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Zimbabwe their ‘Ad Limina’ visit, Rome, 2 July 1998”, In: Popes speak, p. 8).

The Pope says that: “The ...inculturation which you rightly promote will truly be a reflection of the Incarnation of the Word, when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought. By respecting, preserving and fostering the particular values and riches of your people’s cultural heritage, you will be in position to lead them to a better understanding of the mystery of Christ, which is to be lived in the noble, concrete and daily experiences of African life. There is no question of adulterating the Word of God, or of emptying the Cross of its power, but rather of bringing Christ into the very centre of African life and of lifting up all African life to Christ. Thus not only is Christianity relevant to Africa, but Christ, in the members of his Body, is himself African” (John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Kenya, Nairobi, 7 May 1980”, In: Popes speak, p. 4-5).

The end result of a proper inculturation of faith is to preserve all that is good and noble in people’s “way of life by imbuing and informing all significant events and relations with the grace of Christ” (John Paul II, “A speech to students of Cote D’Ivoire, Yamoussoukro, 11 May 1980”, In: Popes speak, p. 9).

John Paul II emphasises that it is a special task of bishops to preserve unaltered the content of the Catholic faith and maintain ecclesial unity throughout the world and bring forth from cultures original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought, whereby the Gospel is brought into the hearts of peoples and their cultures. (cf., John Paul II, “A speech to the bishops of Ghana, Kumasi, 9 May 1980”, In: Popes speak, p. 5).

³¹Cf., Schineller, Peter., A Handbook on Inculturation, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, p. 6.

The process of inculturation has as its goal to allow a given culture to grow in accordance with its own values as long as they are not contrary to the Gospel message. All those involved in the process are mutually enriched by this process³².

The inculturation does not consist in bringing an already inculturated Gospel message to a given culture. It consists rather on bringing the Gospel values, and if they are already present, to recognise them as such, and let the local milieu grow according to these values.

This process, whereby a local culture assimilates and transposes the message of the Gospel, without giving away its essential elements, into a language understood by some particular people (cf., EN 63), is to help to proclaim the Good News to every man, woman and child.

In the process of inculturation, the local cultures are not destroyed. On the contrary, this process transforms these cultures because they become explicitly penetrated by Christ's message. That is why the worthy elements of African traditions are to be preserved, because they are the work of Christ³³.

When the power of the Gospel enters into a given culture, it transforms, regenerates and rectifies some of its elements. "It is through the providence of God that the message is made incarnate and is communicated through the culture of each people. It is for ever true that the path of culture is the path of man and it is on this path that man encounters the One who embodies the values of all cultures and fully reveals the man of each culture to himself. The Gospel of Christ the Incarnate Word finds its home along the path of culture and from this path it continues to offer its message of salvation and eternal life"³⁴.

The Gospel has to be inculturated into the lives of people to whom it is proclaimed.

³²Cf., Carrier, Evangelising the Culture of Modernity, p. 67.

³³Cf., John Paul II, "A speech to the bishops of Ghana, Kumasi, 9 May 1980", In: Popes speak, p. 5.

³⁴John Paul II, "A speech to the bishops of Nigeria, Lagos, 15 February, 1982", In: Popes speak, p. 6.

Otherwise it may be irrelevant because of the differences of expression. That is why, Pope Paul VI, during his visit to Kampala in 1969, expressed so strongly and directly the need for African Christianity. The positive elements of African traditions, according to Paul VI, will find their completion in Christianity. This completion does not entail the uniformity of expression. The African values, reaching their fulfilment in Christ, should be expressed in a typically African way. For that reason, the African Church may be able to formulate her Catholicism using the expressions found in local cultures. This original formulation will be an enrichment for the whole Church³⁵.

Paul VI underlined that “the teaching of Jesus Christ and His redemption are, in fact, the renewal, and the bringing to perfection, of all that is good in human tradition. And that is why the African who become a Christian does not disown himself, but takes up the age-old values of tradition “in spirit and truth” (Jn 4, 24)”³⁶.

In *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II emphasised very strongly the value of inculturation. This process through which “catechesis takes flesh in the various cultures” (EA 59) has two dimensions: “the ultimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various cultures” (EA 59)³⁷. The Pope recognises inculturation as an indispensable element of the process of evangelisation, and as one

³⁵Cf., Paul VI, “An African Christianity” In: Hickey, Modern Missionary Documents, p. 203-204.

³⁶Hickey, Modern Missionary Documents, p. 182.

³⁷In the *Proposition 31* of the African Synod we read that “inculturation is a movement toward full evangelisation. It seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner, it touches them on the personal, cultural, economic, and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, under the action of the Holy Spirit... Inculturation includes the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelisation. It includes theology, liturgy, Church structures, and life. All this underlines the need for research in the field of African cultures in all their complexity” (Brown, Maura, ed., The African Synod. Documents, Reflections, Perspectives, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 97-98).

of the most crucial challenges that the Church has to face at the beginning of the new millennium (cf., EA 59)³⁸.

8. CONCLUSION.

As we have seen, the attitude of the Catholic Church towards world religions is a positive one. The Church recognises that God's saving activity is not confined to her only, but also is present outside of her, and in other religions. She recognises the values found in other religions, and the important role these religions play helping their followers to lead a good life.

In the teaching of the Church, the positive role of other religions is always placed within the context of the unique and indispensable revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is only within this framework that the world religions are seen as having some salvific value for their followers.

For that reason, the Christianity is not on the same level as other religions. It is only in the light of the Gospel as revealed in the Church that the role of other religions is seen in the proper context. The other religions get some salvific value because of God's will as revealed by Jesus Christ and present in the Church.

That is why, the Church recognises the values found in the African Traditional Religion, and sees the positive impact these values had and have on their followers, and stresses the need for evangelisation. Through the process of evangelisation the presence of God will be fully recognised in these values, and that they will reach their completion in Jesus Christ.

There is only one, relevant way of evangelising - inculturation. This process has to be employed in order to proclaim the Kingdom of God to the people of Africa in the most relevant way. It brings a mutual enrichment for a culture and Christianity - from one side, the Gospel is

³⁸Further discussion about the process of inculturation in the teaching of Vatican II, Paul VI and John Paul II, can be found in Shorter, Toward a Theology of inculturation, p. 191-238 and in Carrier, Evangelising the Culture of Modernity, p.81.

proclaimed, and the Church is 'revived' because she finds new expressions of the unchangeable truth; from the other side, the culture is transformed and reaches its highest expression.

The process of inculturation presupposes knowledge of the local traditions. That is why in the second chapter we will look closely on the notion of ancestors within a wider context of the African traditional world view.

CHAPTER II.

THE NOTION OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION.

1. Relevance of the study of ATR in the contemporary Africa.

African Traditional Religion is a religious reality at the beginning of the 21st century. There is no doubt that Christianity and Islam claim more and more followers every year, out of which a great number are those who were followers of ATR. According to John Mbiti, the followers of ATR constitute a significant part of the African society in general³⁹.

At this point a distinction has to be made within followers of ATR. There are those whom we can call 'pure followers'. There is, however, also a second significant group of those who are followers of other religions, i.e. Christianity or Islam, yet whose world view is basically shaped according to ATR⁴⁰.

³⁹According to Mbiti, in 1900, in Africa there was 10 million Christians - 9.2% of the population of 107.9 million; 34.5 million of Muslims - 32%; African religion- 63 million-58%. In 1984: 234 million Christians - 45% of the population of 515 million people; 211 million Muslims - 41 %; African religion - 63 million pure followers. Year 2000: total population of 814 million. Of these 394 million will be Christians - 48. 4%; 339 million Muslims - 41.4 %; 72.4 million pure followers of African religion - 8.9% (Mbiti, John S., Bible and Theology in African Christianity, Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986, no page number - graphic opposite the titlepage. For more detailed information refer to Appendix IV, p. 73).

⁴⁰ "Christianity in Africa today may be said to have two different forms of thought-systems and faith expressions - one official and one popular ... The vast majority of the Christian faithful ... appropriate the teaching of the official Church according to their own circumstances and needs using the dominant symbol system of African Religion" (Magesa, Laurenti, African Religion. The moral traditions of abundant life, Nairobi: St Paul Publications Africa, 1997, p. 20).

2. The definition of 'ancestor'⁴¹.

Before giving the definition of 'ancestor' we want to point out that the ancestors are one of the most powerful spiritual forces in Africa. The ancestors and their veneration constitute a very important part of the African Traditional Religion and while widely spread among African tribes, this cult is not to be found in all of them. Some of the tribes that do not have it are: Tiv of Nigeria, Nuer and Dinka of Sudan⁴².

The ancestor can be defined as "a named forebearer who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance"⁴³.

John Mbiti describes ancestors as the "departed of up to five generations" and calls them "living dead"⁴⁴. Mbiti considers the term 'ancestors' as misleading and calls for its abolition. However, it seems to us that the concept of 'living-dead' is too broad. It suggests that all spirits of those who have died up to five generations can be described as 'living dead'. It would mean that all the features usually attributed only to some dead i.e. ancestors, are attributed to all the

⁴¹It has to be noted that it is a quite difficult task to try to give a comprehensive definition of this term. The first difficulty is the fact that there is no one concept of 'ancestor'; as a matter of fact almost each tribe in Africa understand this notion slightly differently.

⁴²Cf., Shorter, Aylward, "Conflicting Attitudes to Ancestor Veneration in Africa", *AFER*, 11(1), 1969, p. 28.

⁴³Harrington, Patrick, *African Religious Studies*, a course offered in Tangaza College in 1997. We do not at this point develop this definition because the aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive understanding of ancestors.

It has to be noted that different authors use different terminology which, sometimes, is quite contradictory. To give an example of this 'terminological confusion' present among those writing about ATR: "among many African peoples the vast majority of known spirits are ancestral spirits, that is, the ghosts of the dead whether they are the recent dead (living-dead) or long since dead (spirits)" (Gehman J.Richard, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Kijabe: Kesho Publications, 1989, p. 139). However, in Mbiti, John S., *African religions and philosophy*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995, p. 85, we read that "there are spirits and living-dead of children, brothers, sisters, barren wives and other members of the family who were not in any way the 'ancestor' ..."

⁴⁴Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, p. 85.

deceased. Yet, it is not, usually, the case⁴⁵. In Africa, the ancestors seem to be a special group of spirits among the spirits of the living dead.

For the sake of clarity we understand the African world of spirits in this way: there are spirits created by the Supreme Being and there are human spirits⁴⁶. All human beings, after natural death become human spirits. Those spirits, up to the fifth generation are called 'living - dead'. Among the 'living-dead' we distinguish 2 separate groups: 'ancestors' and the other remembered spirits. When there is no one to remember the 'living-dead' personally, they become impersonal, not recognised by name. They become 'its'⁴⁷.

3. The notion of 'ancestor worship'.

The term 'ancestor worship' describes " a variety of religious beliefs and practices concerned with the spirit of dead persons regarded as relatives, some of whom may be mythical"⁴⁸.

It has to be noted that for some the term 'ancestor worship' is not a good term to describe the ancestors activities. The main argument against this term is its ambiguity. 'Worship' seems to refer to the cult given to the Supreme Being. However, the ancestors are not on the same

⁴⁵We do not want to present here the description of those who have died, yet cannot be ancestors, though they can be put into the category of the living dead. It will be presented later.

⁴⁶By ' human spirits' we understand we mean human beings after death.

⁴⁷This is our personal understanding of the world of the spirits which does not reflect all the complexity of the 'after-life' of the African people. Yet, it seems to us that it is a quite correct understanding, which tries to accommodate different notions used by different writers. The idea of such a classification is, more or less to be found among them. Yet, it is certain, that the words used to describe particular categories are sometimes very different, e.g. for us the 'living-dead' are human spirits; Mbiti describes them as "people", that have not yet become 'things', 'spirits', or 'its' (Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 83).

⁴⁸"Ancestor worship" In: New Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 26, 1993, p. 544.

ontological level as the Supreme Being and that is why they do not receive the same kind of veneration. For that reason other expressions are used e.g. 'veneration of ancestors', 'ancestor cult', 'communion with ancestors', 'ancestral rites'⁴⁹.

One of the fundamental concepts in the notion of ancestors is the idea of kinship. This idea is contained in the connotation of the word 'ancestor'. It means that one of the conditions to acquire a status of ancestor is having somebody living in this world as a human being and who is through kinship related to him. To put it into different words, it means that "no one can be an ancestor of an individual who is not kinly related to him"⁵⁰.

Kinship is so important that the rites for the dead that do not have a reference to kinship are generally considered as not belonging to the ancestral cult⁵¹.

4. The African concept of life and death.

The concept of ancestor is deeply rooted in the African world view. We might even say that it is a product of such an understanding of the world. That is why we find it necessary to provide some basic background information for a better understanding of ancestors. We limit ourselves mainly to the concept of life and death, as having the most relevance to us.

Man plays the most important role in ATR. Religion in Africa permeates everything, without making any distinction between 'profane' and 'sacred'. In this sense, everything is 'sacred' because there is nothing 'outside' of religion. Religion is an all-embracing category

⁴⁹Cf. Parratt, John, ed., The practice of presence, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1996, p. 50-51; Idowu, E. Bolaji, African Traditional Religion. A definition, London: SCM Press, 1973, p. 178-182.

⁵⁰Nyamiti, Charles, "Ancestor Veneration in Africa", In: <http://isizoh.net/afrel/nyamiti.htm>, p. 3, date: 00-07-15.

⁵¹Nyamiti, "Ancestor Veneration in Africa", p. 3.

within which all aspects can be placed aptly.

Man is the centre of the world. ATR is basically a 'man-oriented' religion. Mbiti summarises this central position of man in these words: "African ontology is basically anthropocentric: man is at the very centre of existence, and African people see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance: it is as if God existed for the sake of man"⁵².

Man is the focus of the ATR. Among many attributes that could be used to describe man, one of the most basic is life. That is why, the concept of life in general, and in connection to a particular person, plays a very important role. We can say that, apart from being anthropocentric, and also because of it, ATR is a 'vitacentric' religion.

Life is a gift of God and in the scale of African values, it takes the highest place. For that reason, everything is done to enhance it, and everything is done to avoid anything that could hinder it.

The concept of life is a cyclic one. Life follows the process of birth, death and rebirth. It finds its expression in the rites of passages which are to followed in order to strengthen it.

There is no end, but eternal continuity without many changes taking place. The future is known because it has already happened in the past and is happening now.

The process of intensifying life is a complex process, because life itself is seen as a relational reality. Everybody and everything that can help man is used: God, divinities, living-dead, ancestors, human spirits, community, rituals...⁵³. Everything is at the service of this central value.

The concept of time in which life is placed is an important factor in understanding the role of ancestors. Mbiti divides time into two categories: *Zamani* and *Sasa*. *Sasa* time is a period that

⁵²Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 92.

⁵³Cf., Domingues, Fernando, Christology and Traditional Religion in Africa, Roma, 1999, p. 153-154.

includes the present, the very near future, and what has just occurred. To put it into different words, *Sasa* includes all events that have a direct relation to man. *Zamani* time is everything that has been actualised in *Sasa*; it is a time beyond which nothing can go⁵⁴. Both times overlap; what happened in *Sasa* goes to *Zamani*; *Sasa* disappears in *Zamani*.

The period of *Zamani* is of great importance because it is towards it that *Sasa* moves, and it is there that people look for explanations.

For us, there are three very important consequences of such a concept of time. Firstly, there is only a 'near future'. Secondly, there is no end of the world, nor 'world to come' because time is cyclic, and what is today will be reproduced in the future, as understood by the Westerners. Finally 'the now'⁵⁵ is the most important period of time⁵⁶.

'Here and now' is the most important aspect of life. If we say that the ATR is focussed on enhancing life, it means that it is focussed on intensifying 'the now'⁵⁷.

This view means that there is no longing for a better world, simply, because there isn't any; the life after death is a continuation of this life and is described in similar terms⁵⁸.

We have pointed out that for the living the most important is 'the now' and all is centred

⁵⁴Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 22-23.

⁵⁵The understanding of 'the now' is analogous to the understanding of 'the past' and of 'the future'. It is not a moment, but rather a period of time containing one's earthly life, with the emphasis on what is happening to the individual in the present moment.

⁵⁶It would be erroneous to try to locate 'the now' in either *Sasa* or in *Zamani*, because two of them are comparable and interconnected. 'The now' is a meeting point of these two periods.

⁵⁷This idea has been very accurately expressed by Mbiti who said that "belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies, as far as I have been able to discover. But this belief does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life ...Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms" (Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 5).

⁵⁸Cf., Domingues, Christology and Traditional Religion, p. 200-201.

We have pointed out that for the living the most important is 'the now' and all is centred upon enhancing it, including those who have died, and the events in the future e.g death.

Life does not finish in the moment of physical death. Yet, it is a very significant moment because it ends 'the now'. It is a passage to a new dimension of life - 'after-life'. Man continues to live after the death and his relationships with the living change, but it is not brought to an end because life is not restricted to bodily or corporeal existence⁵⁹. Idowu says that "what happened in consequence of the phenomenon called death was only that the family life of this earth has been extended into the after-life..."⁶⁰.

Though inevitable, death is usually seen as an enemy, because it ends 'the now'. The state of the living-dead is a natural, inescapable consequence of death, yet this state is not longed for. The only state that is, somehow, looked positively at is a state of being an ancestor. One of the main reasons is that these living-dead are personally remembered and have an increased power and knowledge. It is a state that is desired because the ancestors can have influence on 'the now' of others.

Those who are personally remembered are in the state of personal immortality. They are still a part of the family, and influence them. They may be 'partially reincarnated'⁶¹ in the children. The period of being personally remembered lasts for about five generations⁶².

When there is no one to remember them personally, the ancestors enter into the state of

⁵⁹Cf., Okopona, K.Jacob and Salayman S.Nyang, eds., Religious Plurality in Africa. Essays in honour of John S.Mbiti, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993, p. 75.

⁶⁰Idowu, African Traditional Religion, p. 184.

The idea that life continues after death finds its expression in African poetry. To see one example, refer to Appendix II, p. 70.

⁶¹For further discussion about the concept of reincarnation, refer to: Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie, Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religion, Onitsha: Imico Publishers, 1992, p. 256-258 and to Shorter, "Ancestor Veneration Revisited", p. 201-202.

⁶²Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 85.

collective immortality⁶³. It is a kind of a second death, because, by that time all personal relationship between the living and the dead would have ceased. Man has ontologically lost his 'humanness', and there nothing more beyond that point⁶⁴. The dead have lost all contact with the family. They have become 'its', using the description of Mbiti. Some of the ancestral rites make mention of them e.g. of those who have died long time ago and whose names are no more remembered⁶⁵. Sometimes, the most illustrious ancestors, e.g. heros, founders are raised to a higher rank of the divinity, and are always remembered⁶⁶.

Mbiti summarises it saying "beyond the state of the spirits, men cannot go or develop. This then is the destiny of man, as far as African ontology is concerned. African religious activities are chiefly focussed upon the relationship between human beings and the departed; which really means that man tries to penetrate or project himself into the world of what remains of him after this physical life"⁶⁷.

⁶³Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 25-26.

⁶⁴Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 163.

⁶⁵Cf., Parratt, The practice of presence, p. 62.

⁶⁶Cf., Ikenga-Metuh,, Comparative Studies, p.266.

⁶⁷Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 27.

We have not presented the whole concept of life and death in ATR, because it is a highly complicated reality. We have chosen only these elements that would help us in a better understanding of the role the ancestors play in ATR.

5. Who can become an ancestor.

In different tribes there are distinct elements that make somebody to become an ancestor.

We find that despite these dissimilarities, there are several common elements.

The majority of African tribes are 'male-focussed', i.e. that the males play the most important role in the society. That is one of the reasons why, usually men can become ancestors⁶⁸.

Ancestors play a very important role in the process of preserving the tradition. Since order is one of the most basic attributes of a society and without which a society cannot exist, it follows that in order to reach a status of someone who is responsible for the society, one had to live a good, moral life. Ancestors are regarded as models of how to live in the community and are a source of tribal tradition and its stability. Since they lived righteously according to the moral standards of the society, ancestors can be in charge of that order⁶⁹ and tradition. They are 'structurally relevant' for the living.

It is, as a general rule that only those who have some offspring, usually male, that may become ancestors. It is an almost indispensable factor flowing from the fact that ancestors are of influence as long as somebody remembers them. That is why not having children is considered as a kind of curse⁷⁰. The fact of having some offspring makes possible the partial reincarnation of an ancestor.

To reach old age and to die a 'natural death' is another element that can be considered as

⁶⁸Cf., Ikenga-Metuh, Comparative Studies, p. 138.

⁶⁹Cf., Nyamiti, Charles, "African Ancestral Veneration and its Relevance to the African Churches". African Christian Studies, 9(3), 1993, p. 16.

⁷⁰Cf., Idowu, African Traditional Religion, p. 187.

vital in order to be recognised as an ancestor. Death in old age is seen as a blessing⁷¹.

One of the most important factors that have to be fulfilled for any individual are the funeral rites. Among, e.g., the Igbo of Nigeria, the performance of befitting funeral rites for the one who passed away is absolutely necessary for admission to the spirit land. Those who are not given these rites, cannot get there and remain on earth wandering about and haunting the living⁷². The final completion of these rites may take, in some tribes, many years⁷³.

6. The place of ancestors in the pyramid of life.

According to the African vision of the world, the Supreme Being is at the top of the pyramid of life. He is the Creator and everything that exists has been created by him. He is the Originator and Sustainer, “his name is on people’s lips at all times, in prayers, spontaneous acts of thanksgiving for blessings received, in oaths, proverbs and all forms of traditional literature”⁷⁴. He is the one who gives life to all, and he is the one to whom prayers are directly addressed when other means fail⁷⁵.

⁷¹Cf., Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies*, p. 137. He writes further that “Death after ripe old age is regarded as good and natural death; and in some places is called ‘God’s death’. Death before this time is regarded as unnatural; for which various explanations are given. There are some unnatural deaths which are known to be punishments from God for one’s sin in this life or in the previous life periods. Death by suicide, accident, leprosy, dropsy, small-pox, epilepsy etc. are regarded as bad deaths. Victims of such deaths are not given the full funeral rites, and consequently cannot become ancestors.” (*Ibid.*, p. 137).

⁷²Cf., Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies*, p. 259. See also about death rituals among Yoruba, p. 261.

⁷³Cf., Holas, B., *Les dieux d’Afrique Noire*, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner S.A., 1968, p. 130.

⁷⁴Shorter, “Conflicting Attitudes”, p. 35.

In Bujo, Bénézet, *African Theology in its social context*, Nairobi: St Paul Publications Africa, 1992, p. 30, we read that “God is not far from the African world. All relationships, person and person, living and dead, and between persons and nature, are rooted in God and point toward God and towards the end of all things... It must also be added that, for African, God cannot be imagined without his creation...”

⁷⁵Cf., Nyamiti, “Ancestor Veneration in Africa”, p. 3.

The belief in the existence of divinities is also widespread in Africa. They were created by God and their power comes from him. They have an ascribed function or are associated with a particular aspect of nature. They often stand for the activities of the Supreme Being or his manifestations⁷⁶. Mbiti puts nature spirits, non-human spirits in this category, and also the ancestors⁷⁷.

The ancestors play a very special role in ATR. It is primarily to them that the prayers are addressed, and from whom help is expected. Because they were human beings people are more at ease when dealing with them than e.g. with the non-human spirits. They are situated in an intermediate stage between those living and the spirit world. Having this special position, they act as intermediaries between the two.

After the ancestors comes man. This category includes all human beings and also those about to be born.

The last elements of the pyramid of life consist of animal and plants i.e. living elements and of other objects that are devoid of biological life.

⁷⁶Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 76.

⁷⁷It seems to us that the ancestors need a special consideration in the pyramid of life. Simply putting them in the category of spirits does not make justice to them, because they are a particular type of spirits. That is why we do not follow, at least here, the division proposed by Mbiti (cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 16).

7. Obligations of the ancestors towards the living.

There is a basic reciprocal relationship between the ancestors and the living⁷⁸. Each group needs the other to enhance their status. The ancestors need the living so that they may exist, be remembered, enjoy the best state of life after death. The living need the ancestors to enhance their life, help them in problems, present their requests to the Supreme Being.

The most important role of the ancestors, from the point of view of the living, is closely related to the place the ancestors have in the pyramid of life. They are in between this world and the world which one enters after death or, rather they participate in these two worlds. They are still 'alive' as far as the living are concerned; and because they are physically dead they share in the spirit world. They are mediators between the living and the Supreme Being.

The ancestors are regarded as members of the family as when they were physically alive. They are in a permanent communion with the living. They are of great importance in any decision making process. They seem to know the secret thoughts of people. They provide for the living, and are considered, after the Supreme Being, as life-giving force⁷⁹.

The ancestors know the living and they know their problems well because, when in this world, they experienced them, too. They are aware of their own great importance because they also have had the confidence in their ancestors. Prayers and rituals offered to them are similar to those that they offered to their own ancestors.

Being spirits and living in the world of spirits, the ancestors are believed to have acquired supernatural power and knowledge. They enjoy a superhuman, sacred status.⁸⁰ It is the case

⁷⁸Cf., Shorter, "Conflicting Attitudes", p. 29, and Shorter, Aylward, "Ancestor Veneration Revisited", *AFER*, 25(4), 1983, p. 201-202.

⁷⁹Cf., Mpagi, P. Wasswa, "The Theology of the Departed and a Suggested Service", *African Christian Studies*, 5(3), September, 1989, p. 45.

⁸⁰Cf., Nyamiti, "African Ancestral Veneration", p. 15.

because they are nearer the Supreme Being, and share, at least partially, in his power. Because of that power, they can influence the living for good or for bad. This status helps them to know better what concerns the after-life.

The exercise of this power to help the living is not only in the interests of the living. It is also in their own interest. If they are to be remembered longer, venerated more piously, and given as examples, they have to help the living. Their personal status as 'who' is longer maintained. If they are not considered as life-enhancing as such, they may be lost in the memory of the living and become sooner 'its'.

If the exemplary life is what keeps the ancestors in the memory of the living, it is surely their mediation⁸¹ that makes people venerate them. Knowing the needs of the living, and having the power to help them, they are of special importance to the living. That is why they receive requests from the living to help them in the life matters e.g. bearing children.

⁸¹ When talking about the mediators of the ancestors, we are faced with two very significant obstacles. The first one concerns the fact, that though almost all writers talking about ancestors mention their mediatory role, they do not explain at length what this role consists in. They explain 'why' but do not say much about 'how'. For this very reason, we cannot develop this point further in our presentation of ancestors. The second problem consists in the understanding of words 'intercession' and 'mediation' in their 'secular' and 'religious' use. In Pearsall, Judy, ed., The New Oxford Dictionary of English, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 950-951, the word 'intercede' is defined as "intervene on behalf of another", and the word 'intercession' as "the action of intervening on behalf of another". On the page 1150, the word 'mediate' is defined as "intervene between people in a dispute in order to bring about an agreement or reconciliation". What follows is that, more or less, these two words 'intercession' and 'mediation' can be used to describe the role of ancestors.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that the word 'mediation', used by Christians, has a religious connotation which is different from the secular one. In Semmelroth, Otto, "mediation" In: Rahner, Karl, ed., Encyclopedia of Theology, Burns and Oates, 1975, p. 952-954, we read that "Christ's mediation is described in the New Testament as the sole mediation between God and man (1 Tim 2: 5)... mediation properly called is exercised by one person on behalf of others in the society... Fundamentally, any saving decision made by human beings have a kind of mediatory significance for the community to which they are united, even if it is not possible to determine the effect of this mediation. And in comparison with Christ's mediation, it is derivative and analogous." In this chapter, when we use words 'intercession' and 'mediation' we use them interchangeably, and in their 'secular' meaning as described above. It is, in our opinion, the way that those writing about the ATR use these words.

Referring to the Christian meaning of the word 'mediation' as presented above, we can say that the ancestors do not play in ATR the same role as Christ in Christianity. Christ is the sole mediator, the only one revealing the Father. We cannot reach God the Father, without passing through Jesus Christ (cf., Lk 10: 22). However, the ancestors are considered as mediators not because people cannot address their prayers directly to the Supreme Being, but rather because they are the 'ordinary' way of addressing the Supreme Being.

It has been already pointed out that the ancestors do not possess an 'independent' power, nor do they act as independent entities. They are always in relationship to the Supreme Being. They are who they are and they have what they have only because of the Creator. They are not addressed instead of the Supreme Being, but only as mediators between him and the living.

Idowu describes the status of ancestors in this way: "The deceased are truly members of the families on earth; but they are no longer of the same fleshly order as those who are still actually living in the flesh on earth. They are closely related to this world; but they are no longer ordinary mortals. Because they have crossed the borderland between this world and the supersensible world, entering and living in the latter, they have become freed from the restrictions imposed by the physical world. They can now come to abide with their folk on earth invisibly, to aid or hinder them, to promote prosperity or cause adversity. To some extent they are intermediaries between Deity or the divinities and their own children: this is a continuation of their earthly function whereby they combined the leadership of the families or communities with the office of family or community priests or priestesses"⁸².

Apart from being mediators, the ancestors play other important roles in relation to the living. They are the guardians of family traditions and life and when the traditions are not preserved they correct the errors of the living. Many natural disasters are interpreted as the violation of tradition which is being punished by the ancestors. Only the life according to the order established by God and the ancestors guarantees the survival of a tribal community⁸³.

Their existence is a source of comfort for the living. The living know that there is always someone next to them who cares for them.

⁸²Idowu, African Traditional Religion, p. 184.

⁸³Cf., Bujo, Bénédet, "The two sources of life: the Eucharist and the cult of ancestors in Africa", African Christian Studies, 2(1), 1986, p. 69.

The ancestors can also communicate with the living by revelations using dreams, personal sickness, ecstasy, trance, possession, prophecies, and divination⁸⁴.

8. Obligations of the living toward their ancestors.

We have shown that the role of the ancestors towards the living is the one of mediation and of enhancing life. In order to gain their help the living have to do certain things. If they fail to carry them out, they are punished.

The duty of the living towards their ancestors can be summarized in one general term: remembrance. In order to have the help of the ancestors ensured, they have to be remembered.

The ancestors are considered as being present in the family. That is why such gestures as giving a pinch of snuff, a swallow of beer, a bit of food are effectuated in the daily life of the family.

They are remembered during the most important events in the life of a person: at birth, at puberty, marriage, death, sickness... For all these events the ancestors are referred to and their assistance is sought.

The living address the ancestors during the cycle of seasons: prayers for rain, thanks for rain, prayers at planting and harvesting crops, prayers at the beginning of hunting or fishing expeditions... They are also invoked during special occasions e.g. death of a king.

⁸⁴Cf., Gehman, African Traditional Religion, p. 140-143. To see the mediatory role of the ancestors among Akamba people, refer to Gehman, African Traditional Religion, p. 153-154.

9. The attitude of the living towards their ancestors.

The attitude towards the ancestors moves between two extremes. Depending upon particularities of the ancestor veneration in a given tribe⁸⁵, this attitude is one of love or fear. Usually, it is a middle position, including these two extremes.

The ancestors are loved, and favourably looked upon because they are members of the family. They help the living using their supernatural power, and they are “the closest links that men have with the spirit world”⁸⁶.

On the other hand, people feel some apprehension towards them. This is because the ancestors may use their power to harm the living, especially when some duties towards them are not accomplished. This fear is also rooted in the fact that the ancestors are living in different conditions which are not desirable to the living⁸⁷.

Piety seems to be the most suitable expression to describe the relationship of the living towards the ancestors. This notion contains the elements of veneration, gratitude, acknowledgment of their status and role, as well as the elements of fear.

The ancestors can also be manipulated. It happens that the veneration offered to them is not an expression of piety but rather of an attempt to use them for one's selfish goals. This

⁸⁵To see more about ancestor veneration among some particular tribes, refer to: Ikenga-Metuh, Comparative Studies, p. 139-145.

⁸⁶Cf., Mbiti, African religions and philosophy, p. 83.

⁸⁷It has been mentioned above that the state of ancestors is desirable for the living in the sense that the living are aware that they have to die. The best they can expect after death is to become an ancestors - to be remembered, venerated, having influence on the living.

Here when we say that the status of ancestors is not desirable, we mean that if the living were to choose between the status of ancestors and the status of living, they would choose the status of living because of the value of 'the now'. Closely related to this is an idea of partial reincarnation in ATR. One of the views in explaining this idea is the fact that the ancestors are not totally satisfied with their state, which is basically a passage to collective immortality and want to, at least partially, to come back and live in the world, in 'the now'.

attempt at manipulation is deeply rooted in the anthropocentric orientation of ATR, where everything is looked upon from the point of view of its relation to man.

10. Conclusion

As we have seen, the ancestors play a very important role in the traditional African world view. That is why the ancestor veneration is so widely spread among Africans.

Ancestors enjoy a special status - they are in two worlds. They are a kind of bridge joining these two worlds. Bestowed with some special powers they are of special importance to the living. They can harm them, but they are venerated rather because they can help those still in this world. The main reason of their veneration is the fact that they can enhance life which is such an important value in the ATR.

The relationship between the living and the ancestors, and also between the ancestors and other spirits, including the Supreme Being reflects very well a social dimension of the African world view. It is an indispensable element of that world-view in which 'I am because we are'.

Having looked closely at the so far-reaching role of the ancestors in a traditional culture, let us see how this veneration has been used in the process of the evangelisation and which new application can be thought of..

CHAPTER III

THE POSSIBILITIES OF USING ANCESTOR VENERATION IN THE PROCESS OF INCULTURATION IN AFRICA.

1. Introduction.

In the first chapter, we have emphasised the need of inculturation in the process of evangelisation. Inculturation of those African beliefs which are not contrary to Christianity is seen as a necessity in an effective proclamation of the Kingdom of God in Africa.

As we have seen, ancestor veneration plays an important role in African Traditional Religion. That is why we should try to inculturate this notion in Christianity so as to help people to accept better God's message, by showing them that it was already present in their native customs.

In order to do it, we will look at some of the important elements of Christianity from the perspective of ancestor veneration. As Nyamiti says: "It is possible to explicate the entire Christian message and life from the perspective of the African ancestral conception alone"⁸⁸.

⁸⁸Nyamiti, "African Ancestral Veneration", p. 17.

It is not possible here to look at the whole content of Christian faith from the point of view of ancestor veneration. We limit ourselves to only some important elements.

2. The explanation of the Trinity using the notion of ancestors⁸⁹.

Charles Nyamiti in his article published in 1977⁹⁰ makes an attempt to look at the Three Divine Persons and their mutual relations from the point of view of the features of ancestors.

He considers the understanding of ancestor as the immediate parent of a given individual as the most relevant feature that can be applied to God. He finds this relationship as analogous to the relation that exists through Christ between God and the Christian community. It is through Christ that God is the true progenitor of that community. The Church is the continuation of the incarnation of God's Son. God loves the members of the Church, but he can also become angry at them when they ignore him. God cares for the faithful and keeps them safe from evil⁹¹.

If the ancestor is understood as having a mystical relationship with his descendants and being the model of behaviour, these relations are to be found in the Trinity. God the Father is the Giver of life to his Son through generation. He is the archetype and norm for the Son who is his perfect image. In the Trinity we find the community of nature between the Father and the Son, and a deep relationship of love through the communication of the Holy Spirit. So, God the Father

⁸⁹For a general approach to the mystery of the Trinity from an African point of view, refer to Nyamiti, Charles, "Divine immanent responsibility. The African approach to the Mystery of the Trinity," African Christian Studies, 14 (1998), p. 1-39.

It has to be noted at the very beginning of this part that it is not possible to present all aspects of a given idea. We just present some aspects.

We should also keep in mind that a presentation of the Trinity from an 'ancestral point of view' by its very nature must be limited because the Trinity is basically a mystery, and the language of 'theology of ancestors' is still fairly circumscribed.

⁹⁰Charles Nyamiti, "African Tradition and the Christian God," Spearhead, 49 (1977), p. 1-74.

⁹¹Cf., Nyamiti, "African Tradition and the Christian God", p. 46.

can be considered as the Ancestor of God the Son⁹².

The ancestorship of God is the model for 'human ancestorship'. God the Father is the Ancestor⁹³ in the proper sense of the word and 'human ancestorship' derives from it⁹⁴. The Trinity is the model of all human ancestorship.

The descendancy of the Son is based on generation and on the sanctity of the Father, because even in 'human ancestorship' apart from offspring, good life is another necessary element for ancestorship.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is an important component because it is through him that mutual communication takes place. He can be considered as the 'fruit' of the mutual communication based on love between the Father and the Son, and also as the 'expression' of their mutual love. The Father and the Son exist prior to the existence of the Spirit, though it is not a priority of being. The substance of the Holy Spirit is the same as the substance of the Father and of the Son.

The Son takes part in the spiration of the Holy Spirit not only as the Son but also as a

⁹²Cf., Nyamiti, "African Tradition and the Christian God", p. 47. It is an analogical understanding. Nyamiti points out to the difference in relation of an ancestor to his descendant and the relation of God the Father to his Son. The main dissimilarities are: God communicates his entire being to the Son (the ancestor only a part), there is no death involved for God to become ancestor, the communication that exists between Father and Son is one of nature and life (the communication between an ancestor and his descendants usually takes place through a rite), the Son is the perfect image of the Father (the human offspring does not perfectly conform to his ancestor) (cf., Nyamiti, "African Tradition and the Christian God", p. 47-48).

⁹³"God the Father is ...our Ancestor; for all the essential elements contained in the African conception of ancestor apply also, *mutatis mutandis*, to our relationship with Him: He is our Father (kinship), He is absolutely holy (sacredness), He is our supreme model of conduct (exemplarity), and thanks to His holiness and Fatherhood to us He has absolute right to our unbroken allegiance to Him through prayer and ritual offering (title to our regular sacred communication). Briefly then: God the Father is our parent - Ancestor, and we are his descendants" (Charles Nyamiti, "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter between the living and the dead," African Christian Studies, 1 (1985), p. 33).

⁹⁴This conclusion flows from the definition of ancestor proposed by Nyamiti. For him "an ancestor is a personal parent of another person, of whom he is the archetype of both nature and behaviour, and with whom he is entitled to have regular sacred relationship through communication of some sort." (Nyamiti, "African Tradition and the Christian God", p. 48). This definition implies that the term 'Ancestor' is broader than 'Father' because of the special kind of relationship that exists in between the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. (cf., Nyamiti, "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter", p. 48).

Descendant. His role can be described in terms of a sacred rite that is performed most willingly for the Ancestor. This aspect stresses the spontaneity of the Son's love to the Father. The Son offers the 'ritual gift' to the Father, his Ancestor. The Ancestor receives the gift and gives it back to the Descendant⁹⁵.

God the Father wanted to bestow on us his divine life through the mediation of Christ. He established his ancestorship to us through Christ.

In the process of incarnation, God's ancestorship acquired some characteristics of human ancestorship. God became the Ancestor through the man Jesus Christ. His ancestorship bears fruits after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ became the sole Mediator between God and man.

Christ, the Son is the Mediator, the exemplar for the faithful and the source of the Christian tradition. Through his death and resurrection, Christ established a mysterious relationship between himself and the rest of humanity. Even after his death and resurrection, Jesus remained perfectly human. Through the incarnation, Christ incorporated human ancestorship into the Mystical Body and identified himself with that Body. He perfected the status and mediation of the human ancestors⁹⁶.

⁹⁵Cf., Nyamiti, "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter", p. 49.

⁹⁶Nyamiti summarises the relationship between the Christ and human ancestors as follows: "...the ancestors become through Christ even more powerful and efficient than before, since their mediation becomes mystically united to that of Christ. Thus, humanity in its totality, including its ancestorship, was destined to be incorporated and perfected in Christ. All this is in keeping with the principle that grace does not destroy nature but presupposes it and perfects it." (Nyamiti, "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter", p. 51).

For a summary of what we have presented, refer to Nyamiti, "African Ancestral Veneration", p. 22.

It has to be noted that the idea of using the concept of ancestors to explain elements of Christian faith, e.g. the Trinity, is fairly recent. And because of it, it lacks often the 'theological sophistication'. Another problem is that, as Nyamiti puts it "very few African theologians have examined systematically the theology on the Christian God from the perspective of the African conception of ancestor" (Nyamiti, "African Ancestral Veneration", p. 21). That is why what we present here should be treated as a presentation of an 'embryo stage' of the approach to Christian mysteries through the notion of ancestors rather than of a 'definite theology'.

3. Christ as our ancestor.

Charles Nyamiti⁹⁷ looks at Christ and his role and the many similarities between his relationship to us and the relationship between an ancestor and his closest kins in a nuclear family⁹⁸.

Christ is connected to us through consanguinity because of his Adamite origin, his supernatural status and his death and resurrection. He possesses a supernatural status and is endowed with supernatural power and mediation between the Father and people. By his life and resurrection he became the model of conduct and source of Christian tradition and its stability.

There is a communication between him and his followers, especially through the sacrifice of the Mass, prayers and offerings. Neglecting to carry out duties towards him on the part of human beings results in an offence against Christ which may be punished by spiritual or bodily calamities. The relationship may be restored through prayer and ritual activities⁹⁹.

Christ may be present to Christians in many different ways, e.g., through other people with whom he identifies himself. In the Eucharist he communicates directly giving his body and blood to be consumed. Because he is not limited by time or space, he can be everywhere, though there are 'modes' in which he is especially present e.g., the Eucharist, Word of God...

The first person of the Trinity is the common and immediate Father of Christ and of his

⁹⁷Charles Nyamiti, Christ as our Ancestor, Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984.

⁹⁸Nyamiti limits himself to this kind of relationship because, according to him, it is this type of ancestorship bears the closest analogy to Christ's Brother-Ancestorship. (cf., Nyamiti, Christ as our Ancestor, p. 16).

⁹⁹We use the vocabulary that is relevant to describe 'ancestor -earthly kin relationship'. We apply this language, though aware of inconsistencies, to 'Christ-Christian relationship' in order to bring forth the similarities between two of them.

earthly members¹⁰⁰.

Because of many fundamental similarities between the ancestorship of Christ and African ancestorship, Nyamiti proposes a definition of ancestor that can be applied to Christ and to human ancestors: "a brother-ancestor is a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent, and of whom he is mediator of God, archetype of behaviour and with whom - thanks to his supernatural status accorded through death - he is entitled to have regular sacred communication"¹⁰¹.

Christ's ancestral role is related to the ancestorship of the Father. Both are based on generation and holiness, both are entitled to have regular communication with their descendants in the Holy Spirit.

There are, however, differences. The ancestorship of the Father is based on the fact that he is the Father - his ancestorship is parental, immanent, eternal and necessary. Christ's ancestorship is brotherly, essentially economic and freely bestowed on us.

The ancestorship of the Father is the basis of the role of Christ. Christ is our brother-ancestor because he is the Descendant. He is our brother-ancestor because of his incarnation.

The intimate relationship between the Father and the Son is also reflected in their ancestorships. The Son's being and activity are from the Father and whatever he does to us is from the Father. It means that whenever the Son acts ancestrally towards us, it is the Father's ancestorship that is active. It also means that God the Father exercises his ancestorship through

¹⁰⁰Cf., Nyamiti, Christ as our Ancestor, p. 19-20. It would be wrong to say that the relationship between ancestors and the living is the same as between Christ and Christians. There are also very important differences e.g. Christ is both human and divine whose mediation is rooted in the Trinity, we are sons in Christ only by divine adoption, he is infinitely more perfect model of conduct than any human ancestor can be, his mediation is indispensable ... (cf., Ibid., p. 20-23).

¹⁰¹Cf., Nyamiti, Christ as our Ancestor, p. 23. Nyamiti goes on to explain some connotations of that definition. He says that a brother-ancestor does not have to be a relative of a living person and that the definition refers to females too. Our filiation to God the Father through Christ takes place through habitual grace. It means that without such a grace one cannot be Christ's brother-descendant... (cf., Ibid., p. 23-24).

ancestralship that is active. It also means that God the Father exercises his ancestralship through the ancestralship of his Son¹⁰².

The incarnation of Christ was already an anticipation of the glory that he was to achieve through his death and resurrection. By taking upon himself human condition, Christ has humbled himself already in the incarnation. This humiliation reached its pinnacle at the Cross (cf., Phil. 2: 7-9). We may conclude that at the moment of Christ's conception all the essential elements of his ancestralship were fundamentally present.

Through his death and resurrection, Christ's ancestralship achieved its full maturity¹⁰³. It was after his resurrection that Christ sent us the plenitude of the Holy Spirit. Through his death and resurrection Christ ransomed us, removed our sins, restored our lost adoptive sonship and descendancy and reconciled us with his Father in the Spirit. That is why, the Paschal Mystery is the climax of Christ's ancestral activity¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰²Cf., Nyamiti, Christ as our Ancestor, p. 63-64.

¹⁰³For further discussion concerning the role of death and resurrection of Christ, refer to: Nyamiti, Charles "Some Items of African Family Ecclesiology" In: Ryan, Patrick, ed., The Model of "Church-as-Family": Meeting the African Challenge, Nairobi: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), 1999, 10-15. This point is also developed in Nyamiti, "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter", p. 34-37.

¹⁰⁴Cf., Nyamiti, "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter", p. 42-44.

It is not the purpose of the present chapter to look closely at all aspects of Christ's ancestralship as presented by Nyamiti. We have just shown that it is quite possible and theologically relevant to look at the mysteries of Christ and of the Trinity from the point of view of ancestralship. This approach can be useful and helpful for many Christians in Africa to comprehend better the mysteries of our faith.

Another writer who looks on Jesus from the point of view of ancestral relationship is Bénézet Bujo. There is a lot of similarities between his and Nyamiti's approaches. Jesus is called 'Proto-Ancestor' because he did not only realize the authentic ideal of God-fearing ancestor, but also transcended this ideal and brought it to its completion. Jesus Christ is "the ultimate embodiment of all virtues of the ancestors, the realization of the salvation for which they yearned... Jesus Christ is the Proto-Ancestor, the Proto-Life-Force, bearer in a transcendent form of the primitive 'vital union' and 'vital force'. By his resurrection, Jesus is taken up once and for all into the glory of God. He not only has life, he is life and awakens others to life" (Bujo, African Theology in its social context, p. 81).

Bujo continues on saying that Jesus Christ helps to fully understand ancestors. God has spoken in the history also through ancestors and established finally Jesus Christ as unique Ancestor from whom all life flows for his descendants. For this reason ancestors can be understood as forerunners or images of the Proto-Ancestor, Jesus Christ (cf., Bujo, African Theology in its social context, p. 83).

A similar presentation of Christ as ancestor can be found in Lumbala, Kabesélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother" In: Schneiter, Robert, ed., Faces of Jesus in Africa, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 116-126.

4. The understanding of the Church using the notion of ancestors.

Christology is a starting point of ecclesiology¹⁰⁵. Since we have shown that it is possible to understand Christ from the point of view of ancestors, it will be also possible to look at the Church from the same point of view.

The Church is the continuation of the mysteries of Christ. Christ can be seen as the ancestor of all Church members: those in heaven, those in purgatory and those living still on earth¹⁰⁶. Because of the close relationship between Christ and the members of the Church¹⁰⁷ (cf., Rom 12: 4-5), the Church can be considered as “the extension of Christ’s ancestorship to human communities”¹⁰⁸.

Nyamiti uses the expression ‘koinonia with divine ancestors’ to point to the fact that the Church members have ancestral communion of kinship with the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Father is our parent-ancestor through the Son. This kind of descendancy is only possible through the grace of adoption communicated to us by the Spirit¹⁰⁹.

“The ...principle of our ancestral koinonia with Christ is the grace of adoptive

¹⁰⁵To see some consequences for the ecclesiology of the explanation of the Trinity using the notion of ancestors, refer to Nyamiti, “Some Items on African”, p. 8-10.

¹⁰⁶Cf., Nyamiti, “African Ancestral Veneration”, p. 23.

¹⁰⁷The Christian concept of ‘Mystical Body of Christ’ can, somehow and with evident differences, also be found in ATR. In Bujo, “The two sources of life”, p. 69 we read that “... to prolong life is not only the duty of the “most placed” in the hierarchy of participation, but each member, whatever his rank in this hierarchy, has the inalienable duty to provide for the reinforcement, i.e. for the prolongation of life. The ancestral community which embraces the living and the dead is a mystical body. There, it is not only the high dignitaries who have duties towards those who are the least, but the reverse is also true. The vital force which flows from the head to the members returns, conversely, from the members to the head, not as exhausted but renewed by the dynamism of each. Let us put it more clearly: the good realized by one of the members contributes to the blossoming of the whole body, that is to say, of all the members”.

¹⁰⁸ Nyamiti, Charles, “The Church as Christ’s ancestral mediation: an essay on African ecclesiology” In: Mugambi J.N.K. and Magesa, Laurenti, eds., The Church in African Christianity. Innovative essays in ecclesiology, Nairobi: Initiatives Publishers, 1990, p. 132.

¹⁰⁹Cf., Nyamiti, “The Church as Christ’s ancestral mediation”, p. 132.

descendancy in us, which is a participation, through the Spirit, in the eternal descendancy in the Trinity... Thanks to the eschatological participation of this descendancy, the God-man does not only become our brother-ancestor; we also become sharers of his prophetic, royal, priestly functions, besides becoming members of his entire Body - the militant (Church on earth), suffering (those in purgatory) and triumphant (saints) Church"¹¹⁰.

By the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf., John 15: 26; 16: 13) which is sent after the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians are the sharers in Christ's divine descendancy. Through this gift our communion with divine and human ancestors, and also with the other members of the Church is deepened.

Christ is the brother-ancestor and the Father is the parent-ancestor of all members of the Church. Those members in heaven and purgatory become the ancestors by becoming partakers in the ancestorship of God. Those members on earth achieve this relationship with the saints in heaven.

Nyamiti points out that non-African saints are also true ancestors because they fulfill the conditions to be ancestors, namely: divine kinship, mediation, supernatural status, exemplarity of conduct and the sacred communication with the earthly members of the militant Church¹¹¹.

As in the case of earthly ancestral relations, the vertical and horizontal aspects of these relations can be found in the *koinonia* with ancestors in the Church. The vertical aspect consists of the communion between the terrestrial members and their human and divine ancestors. The horizontal one refers to the close relationship and mutual concern between the members of the

¹¹⁰ Nyamiti, "The Church as Christ's ancestral mediation", p. 133.

¹¹¹ Cf., Nyamiti, "The Church as Christ's ancestral mediation", p. 134.

militant Church due to their common divine and human ancestors¹¹².

The unity of the Church is seen principally, though not exclusively in its visible aspects such as: oneness in profession of faith, oneness of government and cult. This unity is rooted in the model of the Church as the Body of Christ and People of God.

From the African ancestral point of view, the unity takes place on two levels: external (unity of faith, government, cult) and internal (unity of the life of grace). These elements are to be accepted by Church members not only because of its origin in the teaching of Christ, but also because they reflect the life of divine ancestors in the Trinity. In the Trinity there is oneness (unity of nature) between the divine ancestors.

This oneness does not mean 'uniformicity' but unity in diversity and diversity in unity. As the life of the divine Ancestors was made visible in the incarnation, the same should take place in the Church. She, through her institutions, should manifest the divine ancestors whose revelation is the model and glorification in the Church is her ultimate goal¹¹³.

The Church is holy in virtue of her origin in Christ and her purpose which is the salvation and glory of God.

The holiness of the Church is rooted in the holiness of her founder brother-ancestor Jesus Christ. The Church is holy also because ancestorship as such is sacred.

The final purpose of the Church is the participation in Church's own divine descendancy. The glorification of God, which is another purpose of the Church, can be understood as the "exaltation of this pneumatic ancestorship and descendancy by allowing them to have full impact

¹¹²Cf., Nyamiti, "The Church as Christ's ancestral mediation", p. 136.

Nyamiti goes on to explain further different aspects of the Church using the notion of ancestors. Useful, interesting and enlightening as they may be, they cannot be presented here. We want to present shortly only four traditional attributes of the Church from the African ancestral perspective.

¹¹³Cf., Nyamiti, "The Church as Christ's ancestral mediation", p. 147-149.

on human lives and the totality of creation”.¹¹⁴ From this point of view, the Church is seen as the extension of Christ’s descendent holiness in the Trinity into human communities.

The ancestral approach to the Church is an invitation to promote her growth in number ‘from within’ by baptising and ‘from without’ by the conversion of individuals to the Church of Christ. It is rooted in the idea of ancestors having as many descendants as possible¹¹⁵.

In the African ancestral sense, the notion of the catholicity of the Church is related to the ‘dynamism’ and ‘openness’. They include all earthly citizens together with the divine and human ancestors. The catholicity refers to all Christians on earth, in heaven and in purgatory. Going even further, Nyamiti asserts the transcendental value of catholicity that goes beyond all limitations of time, place, religious denomination...¹¹⁶.

Apostolicity can be understood as “ the perdurance of the magnanimity of the spirit that was originally poured forth on the Apostolic Church at Pentecost”¹¹⁷. This ‘magnanimity of the spirit’ is ancestral in origin because it was present in the divine ancestors. From them it was poured forth on the Apostles by the medium of the Holy Spirit. From them it was communicated to their immediate followers and to the whole Church. For this reason, this spirit is of divine and human ancestral origin and as such it is to be the principle of conduct of all Church members¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁴Nyamiti, “The Church as Christ’s ancestral mediation”, p. 150.

¹¹⁵Cf., Nyamiti, “The Church as Christ’s ancestral mediation”, p. 149-151.

¹¹⁶Cf., Nyamiti, “The Church as Christ’s ancestral mediation”, p. 151.

¹¹⁷Nyamiti, “The Church as Christ’s ancestral mediation”, p. 152.

¹¹⁸We have just presented some elements of the Church viewed from the point of view of ancestral relationship. The article contains also some information about other elements. Some relevant information is presented by the same author, Charles Nyamiti in already mentioned article “African Ancestral Veneration”, p. 21-35.

5. Inculturation of ancestor veneration in the liturgy¹¹⁹.

According to Bujo “the cult of ancestors is the most solemn moment in which the intensification of the vital force in the ancestral mystical body reaches its apogee”¹²⁰.

As we have already mentioned in second chapter, the concept of life plays a crucial role in ATR. Therefore, the Eucharist has to be seen within this context.

The vital force comes from God and is mediated by the ancestors. In the Christian context God communicates his life through Christ whom he has made Proto-Ancestor. It was through his death and resurrection that Christ has been fully established as Proto-Ancestor by the Father.

Christ becomes the food for the believers because he is the vital force par excellence, and it is from him that all life flow in the descendants. And since he is the source of all the ancestral vital force, it is evident that people are to participate in his vital force in order to grow¹²¹.

In this context, the Eucharist becomes a ‘proto-ancestral meal’, because Christ himself makes us sharers of his death and resurrection. Like the Apostles, we are strengthened for our daily life to be better followers of his.

The role of the priest is similar to the role of a leader of an African community. He is to reinforce and make grow the vital force of the community. It can be done by extending and transmitting the life of the Proto-Ancestor. From this perspective, it is evident that priesthood is not to be considered as a social promotion, but as “proto-ancestral heritage of Christ”¹²². A priest

¹¹⁹It is impossible to consider all the attempts of the inculturation of the veneration of ancestors in the liturgy. We will limit ourselves to look at some elements of the Eucharist where these attempts have been made and where the connotation of veneration of ancestors may help us to understand it more fully. To see the general guidelines for the process of inculturation, refer to Appendix III, p. 72.

¹²⁰Bujo, “The two sources of life”, p. 70.

¹²¹Cf., Bujo, “The two sources of life”, p. 73-74.

¹²²Bujo, “The two sources of life”, p. 77.

is to draw consequences from the Eucharistic life in order to make his people live more happily¹²³.

One of the areas of the Mass where some theologians have been trying to use the ancestral vocabulary are Eucharistic prayers.

In these prayers God is named in conformity with the ancestral language. He is called “Great Ancestor” in a prayer based on a Kikuyu prayer¹²⁴; “Father of our ancestors”¹²⁵.

The ancestors themselves are invoked, e.g. as “Oh, you ancestors of Zimbabwe, you who

¹²³Such an approach has many ‘social consequences’. The participation in the proto-ancestral meal makes us sharers in the vital force of Christ. In the present situation of Africa, this ‘spiritual participation’ has to be translated into a language of concrete acts for the improvement of life of people. Bujo summarises this aspect in following words “...the Eucharist constitutes the soul of the Christian life... an Eucharistic assembly which would not bring awareness to vital problems would be hypnotising assembly which distracts people, makes them forget hunger, diseases, dictatorship for a moment by focussing solely on a heavenly world, ignoring the bitter reality here below. Such an assembly cannot promote the full life that Christ wants us to have. And the God of life who has made his Son proto-ancestor and source of life, will ask us to render an account of it.” (Bujo. “The two sources of life”, p. 82).

The Mass looked upon from the ancestral point of view, has been far more theologically analysed by Nyamiti. It is not our goal to present his approach. What we want to do is to mention some of his insights, apart from those already presented above.

Nyamiti sees the Mass as the “renewal of the accomplishment of Christ’s Ancestorship... Thanks to the oneness of the Saviour’s Ancestorship with His redeeming Descendancy the re-enactment of its accomplishment in us inevitably entails the fulfilment of our life of adoptive descendancy, which is sharing in the life of the redeeming Descendant of the Father... Besides its quality as the sacrament of the paschal fulfilment of our Redeemer’s Ancestorship the Mass is the ritual memorial and effective sign of the prolongation of the ancestral ritual communication in the Trinity onto Christ’s humanity through His Easter events.” (Nyamiti, “The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter”, p. 38).

He stresses the fact that, apart from perfecting the life of adoptive descendancy in us, The Eucharist deepens also the pneumatic ties between the earthly citizens and all the other members of Christ’s Mystical Body. That is why the Mass allows us to contact all types of ancestors: African traditional ancestors, non-African heavenly saints, the unique Brother-Ancestor and our divine Parent-Ancestor. (cf., *Ibid.*, p. 40-40).

The fact that the positive elements of the veneration of ancestors can be used to explain the Mass points out clearly to the validity and value of the ancestor veneration. What follows is that it is legitimate to introduce this veneration into Christian liturgy. (cf., *Ibid.*, p. 43).

Nyamiti continues by giving practical suggestions so as to incorporate more fully ancestral ideas into the liturgy of the Church. He proposes that the tabernacle could be explained as a place where Christ, our Brother-Ancestor is daily present so we can communicate with him; body and blood of Christ should be kept in the tabernacle so as to stress more the death of Christ. It would represent his death through the separation of His body and blood on the cross. It could help people to see Christ as present in His shrine (tabernacle). These species would also fittingly symbolise the ritual offerings to the ancestors: food and drink. Finally, Nyamiti postulates that other forms used in ancestor veneration, e.g. prayers, dances, ceremonies... should be adopted in the liturgy. (cf., *Ibid.*, p. 44-45).

¹²⁴Lumbala, F.Kabasélé,, Celebrating Jesus Christ in Africa. Liturgy & Inculturation, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998, p. 36.

¹²⁵Lumbala, Celebrating Jesus Christ, p. 37.

have hunted the buffalo and antelope ...who have brought into the world the San, the Khoi, the Zulu...Be with us"¹²⁶.

As we have seen, the veneration of ancestors, or at least some elements of it can be used in explaining the mysteries of Christian faith such as, e.g. the Trinity, the role of Jesus, the notion of the Church and the Eucharist. It may not be yet a fully satisfactory approach from a theological point of view. However, we have to recognise the fact that the use of local African beliefs may help people of Africa to believe more fully in Jesus Christ.

6. My personal proposals¹²⁷.

The complexity, difference, and advantages of the African world view, including the ancestor veneration should be a very strong argument for those preparing themselves to work in Africa to do their studies in Africa. That is why such initiatives as Tangaza College should be

¹²⁶Lumbala, Celebrating Jesus Christ, p. 41. See also p. 29-31. Lumbala describes a way in which the traditional libation to ancestors can be included in the rite of Mass. (cf., Lumbala, Celebrating Jesus Christ, p. 48-50). In the subsequent parts of his book, he looks at the sacraments and tries to come up with some suggestions so as to 'africanise' them more. It is evident that the elements of the veneration of the ancestors may be used there.

For discussion concerning the use of the concept of ancestors in the Zairean liturgy, refer to: Egbulem, Nwaka, The Power of Africentric Celebrations. Inspirations from the Zairean Liturgy, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996, p. 89-92.

¹²⁷It has to be noted that I am not an African, and my knowledge of African beliefs is mostly a theoretical one. I have talked about these beliefs with my confreres, and had some pastoral experience. I do not consider myself as an 'expert' but rather as 'a boy preparing himself for the rite of initiation' which will take place after having finished Tangaza College. African beliefs are not explicitly a part of my world view. It has its advantages and disadvantages. It is possible that I may not well understand the African beliefs, but also, as 'an outsider' I may be able to look more deeply into things.

Making my proposals concerning how the ancestor veneration can be used so as to help Africans to believe better in Jesus Christ, I am well aware that my proposals are general ones. As it has been stated, there is no one ancestor veneration common to all African in spite of the fact that there are many common elements. In the proposals I will address the common elements. They are to be considered as theoretical proposals. The real, practical work of inculturation of ancestor veneration will start for me when I will work among a specific tribe. Only then, will I be able to address this issue properly.

praised and given as a point of reference. Such missionary congregations and institutes should put an emphasis on the formation and the teaching on the practical and theoretical knowledge of African beliefs. It will help people to understand and appreciate better what is good in the African world view and also to communicate more effectively with people who are emerged in it.

In the process of the proclamation of the Gospel, the missionaries¹²⁸ should avoid the approach that would make people think that at the moment of becoming a Christian they have to forsake all their traditional practices. The stress should rather be put on the fact that people should bring with them their traditional religious practices, including a variety of ancestor practices, see what is good and praiseworthy in them and to christianise these practices. Only then, will Christianity not be seen as something foreign but rather as a reality already well grounded in the African beliefs.

This view of Christianity as already rooted in the African traditional beliefs and practices, will also help African Christians to be more open to the process of inculturation. This process won't be seen as coming from the hierarchy but rather will be seen as a 'grass-root activity'.

The holistic approach to life in which an important role is played by ancestors, has to be emphasised in the process of evangelisation. This basic unity of all aspects of life, a thoroughly religious approach to everything should be used in the proclamation of God. The concept of religion as permeating everything should be stressed even more.

The veneration of ancestors emphasises the role of community. 'I am because you (ancestors, living on earth and not yet born) are'. If it is true from the European point of view that no one is an isolated island, how much more true it is in relation to Africa! This concept, so clearly expressed in the ancestral practices and rites, is a very good starting point for explaining

¹²⁸I refer to missionaries because our society, Society of African Missions (SMA) is a missionary society. The missionary situation is also quite well known to me.

more relevantly the concept of the Mystical Body of Christ. Using the African concept of interrelationality, the concept of Body of Christ can be understood more easily even by non-Africans!

It seems that it is a widespread practice of the Catholic Church that those baptised, choosing a new name, are, somehow 'pushed' to choose names that belong to Christian tradition but may have little significance in the local culture. As in Israel where the name described the personality of an individual, the same is true in the African context. For this very reason, the baptismal names, in order to be more relevant, could be taken after famous ancestors. It will be probably far easier for an African to try to imitate the behaviour of somebody who was an African, rather than that of a European.

Ancestor veneration points towards the value of good, moral life. People should live a good life because that is the ideal emerging from the African world view. The same stress is found in Christianity. Those who have preceded us were examples to be followed whether they are looked upon as ancestors or saints¹²⁹. The examples of their lives should be used in preaching and in catechesis so as to make this process more pertinent to the lives of Africans.

The African world view centres itself on 'here and now'. The present moment is all that we have and we can influence, change, improve etc. The past and the future, though influencing us in many ways, are beyond our reach. It is the role of ancestors to help people to enhance this present moment so it may be lived as fully as possible. Starting from this point, it will be very easy to show to people the existential value of their daily deeds. Since 'now' is everything that we have, and the only period that we can influence, it follows that whatever we do in the present is

¹²⁹This distinction is a superficial one because basically there is no difference between two of them. If in order to become a saint one had to live a good life and be officially recognised as such by the Church, the similar process takes place in relation to become an ancestor: one lived a good moral life, and was recognised by the community.

of great consequence for our future. The present moment determines the quality of our future - in the African context it would be whether one will or not will qualify to be an ancestor. In Christianity, it would be whether one will be saved or not. It clearly shows the intrinsic connection between the present and the future. The more good we do now, the better our future will be.

Our acts also influence the community. The better we are, the better the community is. As already mentioned, 'the more community is the more I am' and 'the more I am, the more the community is'.

As we have underlined above, an ancestor 'loses' his humanness when there is no one to remember him. Contextualising this aspect for Christianity, we will be able, once more, to show the importance and the intermingling between an individual and the community. As an ancestor's quality of life declines when he is forgotten, when he has no connection with others, the same process takes place here on earth and in hell. On earth, one cannot live fully if he or she is not in connection with some kind of community. By the fact of being human we are social beings. If we do not develop this part of our personality, we start dying slowly. We could say that hell consists in separation whereas heaven is a communal reality.

The Christian concept of prayers for the dead can be also explained from the perspective of ancestors. An ancestor 'dies out' when he is no longer remembered. He goes to the place beyond our influence. He 'lives' as long as he is remembered. There is hence a mutual relationship between the living and 'the dead'. An ancestor helps the living, and the remembrance of living keeps him in an 'active existence'. That is why, Christians should pray to the saints, and those in purgatory. The saints intercede for us, and we can help those in purgatory to grow towards fulness of their lives with God in heaven.

A Christian prayer is an expression of a theological point of view and of given circumstances. What may be relevant for a European may not be such for an African. For this

reason, the stress should be put on composition of African prayers that would use African expressions and understanding of God coming from an African perspective. As an example we would propose to 'translate' into African context the litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the composition of new African Eucharistic prayers, or at least African prefaces.

It would be very enriching to try to compose a 'all-African litany of saints'. Though the blood relation seems to be very important in the concept of ancestorship, yet some great figures like kings and heroes are also considered ancestors¹³⁰. It would be possible to find such figures in different tribes in Africa and include them in this litany. Such a litany could be very effectively used e.g. during the ordinations of African priests¹³¹.

¹³⁰The exact difference between an ancestor and a saint would require a further theological analysis. However, the similarities are obvious e.g. both led a good life and both have been recognised by the community. Generalising, we can say that every saint is an ancestor, though not every ancestor is a saint.

¹³¹Other theoretical and practical proposals could be thought of. We have presented just some of them. How these proposals are going to be used will be determined by concrete socio-religious situation in given circumstances.

7. Conclusion.

In this chapter we have looked at some elements of Christian faith and we have seen how they were explained using the African concept of ancestors.

It seems clear that ancestor veneration could be a relevant means of approaching and 'translating' the concept of Trinity, Christ, Church ... into a language that is understood by Africans.

We have also pointed out the limits of such an approach. These limitations show that such an approach is basically a new one and is to be seen as a starting point for further reflection.

In spite of these limitations, this understanding is a valid one and is clearly a fruit of a new approach to evangelisation. It will help people to grasp better the mysteries of faith and to be in more close relation with Jesus, because he will be seen as 'culturally relevant' to them.

It is also worthy of mentioning that this kind of explanation is not only useful for Africans. In many cases, the relationships between the living and 'the dead' can help non-Africans to understand better some Christian concepts, e.g. Mystical Body of Christ.

We are at the beginning of a new stage in the Church's approach to other cultures. Though it is only a beginning, the findings are already of great importance. It should give us hope and courage to continue this process.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

In our work we have stressed three very important aspects in the life of the Church. All three are of great consequence for our future ministry and the knowledge of them seems to be indispensable for a missionary in Africa.

In the first chapter, we have shown the attitude of the Catholic Church towards other religions and their relationship to the salvific role of Christ. As the outcome of such an approach we have pointed out to the process of inculturation as the way of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God at the threshold of the Third Millennium.

Inculturation starts with a deep knowledge of a local culture. For this reason in the second chapter we have concentrated on one aspect of the African Traditional Religion, namely on ancestors. Since they are a 'meeting point' between this world and the other, we have included some information about the general beliefs found in ATR as necessary and useful for a fuller understanding of the role of ancestors. We have emphasised their important place in the African world view so as to show the validity of our approach.

In the third chapter we have presented some attempts of African theologians to look at some of the Christian mysteries and try to see them in the light of the ancestral relationships. In the second part of the chapter, we have introduced some of our personal ideas about how the ancestor veneration can be further used in the catechesis and liturgy.

The aim of our work was to show that the attitude of the Catholic Church towards other religions is an attitude of openness. Because of it, it is recommendable, if not necessary for missionaries and pastors in Africa to study African Traditional Religion and make attempts at proclaiming Christ using the language, concepts and expressions taken from this religious tradition.

What has been presented here, especially in the second and the third chapters cannot be seen as presenting everything that can be said about it. We have chosen only some aspects, and we are aware of the limitations of this work. It is not an 'all-answer-providing' work but rather a 'search-for-deeper-understanding' invitation.

The research done for this work and its results partially presented above are going to be of great help for our missionary approach. That was also another aim in choosing such a topic: to ensure that this theoretical reflection will have practical consequences for our future work in Africa.

APPENDIX I

“Your Founder, Mons. de Marion Brésillac, a man of deep faith and great courage, said: “The Society of African Missions has for its principal aim the evangelisation of those countries in Africa which have the most need of missionaries”. Many bishops in Africa are still calling you, thereby recognising your specific vocation. They know that the needs of evangelisation are still immense, and will long remain so. Respond to those calls. They are in line with your vocation: first, announcing the Gospel, especially to the most deprived; helping to form clergy and lay leaders; cooperating in everything that makes for justice and peace, and protecting the environment for future generations. Exclude nobody from your apostolate, remembering that “the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery” (GS 22). Always act with great respect for the local Church, taking an active part in its presbyterium, glad to bring your original contribution, which everyone should recognise”¹³⁰.

¹³⁰John, Paul II, “To the Society of African Missions, Rome, May 13, 1989”, In: Gioia, Francesco, ed., Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995), p. 405.

APPENDIX II

“Forefathers

Listen more often to things rather than beings.

Hear the fire’s voice,

Hear the voice of the water,

In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees,

It is our forefathers breathing.

The dead are not gone forever.

They are in the paling shadows

And in the darkening shadows.

The dead are not beneath the ground,

They are in the rustling tree,

In the murmuring wood,

In the still water,

In the lonely place, in the crowd;

The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things rather than beings.

Hear the fire’s voice.

Hear the voice of the water.

In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees.

It is the breathing of our forefathers,
Who are not gone, not beneath the ground.
Not dead.

The dead are not gone forever.
They are in a woman's breast,
A child crying, a glowing ember.
The dead are not beneath the earth,
They are in the flickering fire,
In the weeping plant, the groaning rock,
The wooded place, the home.
The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things rather than beings.

Hear the fire's voice,
Hear the voice of the water.
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees.
It is the breath of our forefathers".¹³¹

¹³¹ Author unknown, In: Gehman, J. Richard, African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective, p. 146-147.

APPENDIX III

Paragraph 1204 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “the celebration of the liturgy, therefore, should correspond to the genius and culture of the different peoples. In order that the mystery of Christ be “made known to all the nations... to bring about the obedience of faith,” it must be proclaimed, celebrated and lived in all cultures in such a way that they themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled. It is with and through their own human culture, assumed and transfigured by Christ, that the multitude of God's children has access to the Father, in order to glorify him in the one Spirit”.

Paragraph 1205: “in the liturgy, above all that of the sacraments, there is an immutable part, a part that is divinely instituted and of which the Church is the guardian, and parts that can be changed, which the Church has the power and on occasion also the duty to adapt to the cultures of recently evangelised peoples.”

Paragraph 1206: “liturgical diversity can be a source of enrichment, but it can also provoke tensions, mutual misunderstandings and even schisms. In this matter it is clear that diversity must not damage unity. It must express only fidelity to the common faith, to the sacramental signs that the Church has received from Christ, and to hierarchical communion. Cultural adaptation also requires a conversion of heart and even, where necessary, a breaking with ancestral customs incompatible with the Catholic faith.”¹³²

¹³²The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nairobi: Paulines Publication, Africa, 1994, p. 312.

APPENDIX IV

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF ADHERENTS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN THE CONTINENT OF AFRICA¹³³

COUNTRY	1900		mid-1970		mid-1975		mid-1980		projection for year 2000	
	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Adherents	%
Angola	2,353,000	99.4	1,109,250	19.4	881,920	13.9	683,500	9.5	252,400	2.0
Benin	589,200	91.8	1,790,000	66.6	1,589,400	64.1	2,170,000	61.4	3,043,200	51.4
Botswana	102,800	85.7	347,200	56.3	362,560	52.5	390,910	49.2	491,500	34.4
Burkina Faso	1,280,000	90.0	2,384,300	55.4	3,020,520	50.1	3,032,900	44.8	2,991,000	27.3
Burundi	1,097,900	99.8	839,400	25.1	716,900	19.0	580,400	13.5	252,000	1.5
Cameroon	2,479,500	94.6	1,864,000	31.9	1,688,700	26.4	1,530,900	21.6	1,229,800	10.6
Central Africa	766,950	89.6	327,300	20.3	235,800	16.0	240,000	12.0	169,400	5.0
Chad	1,038,000	64.0	978,000	26.9	959,700	24.8	1,020,400	22.8	1,218,000	17.6
Congo	526,600	97.5	79,580	6.7	36,240	5.7	73,240	4.8	75,800	2.8
Equatorial Guinea	113,580	94.6	18,813	6.6	17,400	5.6	15,600	4.6	10,000	2.0
Ethiopia	2,969,000	37.1	2,561,000	14.2	2,392,900	12.8	2,605,000	11.4	4,051,000	7.6
Gabon	259,100	92.5	17,000	3.4	16,140	3.1	15,800	2.9	12,900	2.0
Gambia	13,100	14.7	55,550	12.0	58,500	11.5	61,900	11.0	76,700	9.0
Ghana	1,987,000	89.3	2,854,000	33.2	2,690,800	27.3	2,451,400	21.4	1,177,600	5.6
Guinea	414,015	41.8	1,194,364	39.5	1,324,580	39.0	1,481,250	29.6	1,921,700	22.7
Guinea-Bissau	97,200	81.0	264,700	52.2	277,050	52.8	293,850	51.3	382,000	45.4
Ivory Coast	949,300	94.9	2,113,000	49.0	2,261,700	45.3	2,442,600	43.8	3,224,500	33.5
Kenya	2,779,700	95.8	3,159,430	28.1	3,012,000	22.7	2,972,150	18.9	3,257,000	10.6
Lesotho	271,200	88.9	137,210	13.2	100,310	8.7	80,200	6.2	61,000	3.0
Liberia	271,000	87.4	759,000	49.8	797,100	46.7	843,400	43.5	1,057,000	34.1
Madagascar	1,558,000	60.3	3,409,050	49.2	3859,780	48.1	4,390,160	47.0	7,591,000	42.7
Malawi	714,000	85.2	1,076,200	24.7	1,069,800	21.6	1,097,400	19.0	1,049,000	11.0
Mali	909,000	69.9	1,030,000	29.4	1,100,000	19.3	1,170,000	18.1	1,520,000	13.5
Mozambique	2,504,000	46.4	4,747,300	57.8	4,832,300	52.3	4,963,700	47.8	6,197,000	35.1
Namibia	129,600	91.3	33,100	5.2	28,300	4.0	27,800	3.5	26,400	2.0
Niger	500,000	54.9	565,300	13.6	678,110	12.6	615,880	11.7	742,500	7.8
Nigeria	11,824,000	73.0	6,970,000	10.8	5,024,000	8.0	4,100,000	5.6	4,047,700	3.0
Rwanda	1,059,000	99.8	1,076,900	29.3	976,360	23.2	885,200	18.2	501,000	5.8
Sao Tomé & Príncipe	38,750	96.9	2,000	2.7	1,920	2.4	1,790	2.1	880	1.0
Senegal	292,000	28.2	186,000	4.2	163,500	3.7	159,600	3.2	72,400	0.9
Sierra Leone	876,600	85.4	1,419,950	53.7	1,569,420	52.6	1,747,150	51.5	2,651,200	46.4
South Africa	2,793,000	57.0	3,869,210	18.1	4,189,700	17.0	4,434,400	16.9	6,519,000	13.1
Sudan	2,077,400	38.0	3,258,652	20.6	3,421,000	18.7	3,579,000	16.7	3,545,000	9.1
Swaziland	79,200	99.0	115,700	29.3	112,360	24.0	113,490	20.9	127,260	13.5
Tanzania	3,438,800	89.5	4,227,000	31.8	4,220,300	27.3	4,115,260	22.8	3,822,800	11.7
Togo	447,000	95.1	1,102,250	58.2	1,146,650	51.0	1,188,200	45.8	1,169,000	25.2
Uganda	2,416,700	91.2	2,152,300	21.9	1,962,700	17.3	1,661,000	12.6	1,208,000	5.0
Zaire	8,866,350	98.1	1,856,000	7.7	1,202,420	4.9	955,420	3.4	157,700	0.7
Zambia	749,600	89.7	1,467,200	34.2	1,535,470	39.6	1,585,700	27.0	1,758,730	15.2
Zimbabwe	479,800	96.0	2,469,000	48.5	2,728,500	43.5	3,034,300	40.5	4,440,000	29.3

¹³³Isizo, Dennis, "Geographical distribution of adherents of African Traditional Religion in the continent of Africa" In: <http://isizoh.net/afrel/statistics.htm>, date: 00-07-15.

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