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‘No Longer a European Export’: How the Church became truly global

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Quick: Name the countries with the most baptized Catholics. You might guess Brazil (172.2 million) or the United States (72.3 million). You might miss Mexico (110.9 million) and the Philippines (83.6 million). You might be surprised by the Democratic Republic of the Congo (43.2 million). Only Church demographers know that Nigeria (29 million) will soon pass Spain and may eventually catch Italy.

Catholicism has become the most multicultural and multilingual institution in the world. In 1900 two-thirds of Catholics lived in Europe. Now two-thirds of the 1.2 billion baptized Catholics live in the Global South.

Astute observers have long anticipated this shift. In the fall of 1961, Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, only thirty-four but already a celebrated theology professor at the University of Bonn, met with Cologne’s Cardinal Josef Frings. The two men discussed an address Ratzinger was drafting for Frings—who was nearly blind and would memorize the speech—on the topic of the upcoming Second Vatican Council.

In his draft, Ratzinger contrasted preparation for the First Vatican Council in the 1860s with preparation for the Second Vatican Council, scheduled to open in 1962. Then, liberalism in politics, economics, and theology seemed the most important challenge. Now, globalization was. Radio and television brought the world into almost every home and trains and airplanes allowed ordinary people to journey vast distances. More than anything else, the Church needed to “become in a fuller sense than heretofore a world Church.”

To Ratzinger, Europe’s plunge into the abyss of two world wars between 1914 and 1945 had discredited ideas of Western superiority. Catholics must “recognize the relativity of all human cultural forms” and cultivate “a modesty which sets no human and historical heritage as absolute.”

To read Joseph Ratzinger acknowledging “the relativity of all human cultural forms” is disconcerting. Forty years later he would blast the “dictatorship of relativism” that he associated with modernity. (Comparing young Ratzinger with old Ratzinger has become a scholarly growth industry.) But his analysis in 1961 was shrewd. He did not use the term “decolonization.” Still, neither the Second Vatican Council nor the current Catholic moment can be understood without it.

Catholicism became significantly more global in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as millions of migrants and tens of thousands of missionary priests and nuns left Europe. It did not become more multicultural. When clergy trained in Europe or North America landed in China or Cameroon they lugged with them statues of the Sacred Heart, rosaries, blueprints for neo-Gothic churches, and Latin textbooks. Their theological project was uniformity. In the words of another German theologian, Karl Rahner, Ratzinger’s collaborator during the Second Vatican Council and

his rival in its messy aftermath, these missionaries “exported a European religion as a commodity [they] did not really want to change.”

This Catholic globalization of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often became entangled with imperialism. Missionaries frequently worked with government officials from Catholic colonial powers such as France, Belgium, and Portugal, and even Protestant empires such as Great Britain. (British leaders admired the way Irish Catholic bishops kept order among Irish Catholic soldiers and settlers.) The Protestant imperial German government, not the Catholic Church, funded the first scholarly chair in Catholic mission studies at the University of Münster in the early twentieth century. When its first occupant published an account of German Catholic missions in Africa, he dedicated it to Kaiser Wilhelm II. The same scholar volunteered that missionaries could lift Africans from “their state of rudeness to a life worthy of a human being.”

The Catholic and colonial world shattered in the two decades after 1945. The process began with the Cold War. Before World War II, if they discussed economic growth at all, Catholic intellectuals focused on the industrial North Atlantic and warned against the ways in which growth might disrupt social hierarchies. Growth meant small businesses bought out by corporations, family farms swallowed by large landowners, or families torn apart by a desire for unnecessary luxuries (including mothers working outside the home when extra income was unnecessary). Redistribution, not growth, seemed the most likely solution to the global depression of the 1930s. Foundational documents for Catholic social thought such as the papal encyclicals *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) advocated just wages for (usually male) workers, not greater equality between rich and poor nations.

The postwar struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States for influence in what was then called the Third World changed this calculus. Many Western policymakers feared poverty would serve as the gateway drug to communism. The alternative was economic development, and because Catholic institutions were so numerous in the Global South, they joined colonial governments and international aid agencies in facilitating development programs. Bishops in the tiny West African country of Guinea, for example, requested—and received—from the French government more than seventy million francs in the single year of 1954 to build Catholic schools. In Ghana, women religious from the United States and Europe serving as missionary nurses helped establish the country’s modern medical system.

Catholics also joined the development conversation. Two voices were crucial. The first was Barbara Ward’s. Born in 1914, Ward graduated from Oxford as the only woman in her year with a first-class honours degree. By 1940 she was a full-time writer for the British newsweekly the *Economist*, one of the first women to hold such a role.

Ward married a United Nations diplomat from Australia, Robert Jackson, who spent his career working on hydroelectric development projects. She accompanied Jackson to postings in Australia, India, and the Gold Coast (Ghana). She became friends with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of an independent India, and Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister of an independent Ghana. Informed by these experiences, Ward published several books during the 1950s, written with lightning speed even as she composed pieces for the *Economist* and lectured on both sides of the Atlantic. Always anti-Communist, she reminded her readers that aid to less-developed nations

was the least expensive way to combat the Soviets. Catholics, especially, needed to recognize “moral obligations which stretch beyond our own frontiers.”

Ward’s best-known study, *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations*, appeared in 1962. Now a fixture on the New York-Washington-London policy circuit, Ward became an advisor to the World Bank. The book garnered her a White House dinner invitation with President John F. Kennedy, who jotted down in a notebook his conviction, taken from a conversation with Ward, that the Soviets feared only “a religion that transcends frontiers and can challenge the purpose and performance of the nation state.”

The second voice was that of Fr. Louis-Joseph Lebret. A pilot during the First World War in the French air force, Lebret entered the Dominican order in 1926. He began his ministry in Brittany, where he competed with Communists for the allegiance of dockworkers, and observed with dismay the threat posed to local fishermen by multinational companies claiming the most productive waters. In 1942, he founded a think tank focused on development issues—*Économie et Humanisme*—dedicated to understanding a world with a growing gap between developed and “under-developed” nations.

Catholic students from colonies in West Africa came to see political independence for their native countries as inseparable from native leadership within the Church.

Lebret moved away from a single-minded focus on economic growth toward a wider view, one that acknowledged “the human need for transcendence.” Development meant not just “having more” but “being more.” In the 1950s, Lebret hoppedscotched from Lebanon to South Vietnam to Uruguay to the United Nations to Rome. In São Paulo, he established a satellite version of his development organization and lectured there frequently.

Ward and Lebret understood that Catholics must abandon the equation of the Church with the West. Filipino independence from the United States in 1946, Indian independence from Britain in 1948, Indonesian independence from the Dutch in 1949, Vietnamese independence from France in 1954, and independence for thirty-three countries in Africa, including Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya, between 1954 and 1965, did not move to a single tempo, but the end result was a world of independent nation-states, not colonies and empires.

What also changed after 1945 was that Indigenous peoples fully joined the debate. The most influential group of Indigenous Catholics came from French colonial Africa. Plucked from the best Catholic secondary schools after competitive examinations and given scholarships to study at French universities, Catholic students from colonies in West Africa met each other in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s. Through late-night conversations in shared apartments and dormitories, they came to see political independence for their native countries as inseparable from native leadership within the Church.

Léopold Senghor became the leading voice. He grew up in rural Senegal, where he was educated in missionary schools and converted from Islam to Catholicism before winning a scholarship to study in Paris. He excelled as a student, qualifying to teach in an elite French lycée, or high school,

and then a French university. He became one of the first African-born writers to establish a major reputation in Europe.

After the war, Senghor knew that the old imperial order could not endure. His own poems and essays made the case for Negritude, or pride in the autonomous value of African cultures. In the 1940s, he unsurprisingly clashed with European Catholic missionaries who complained about an African "lack of civilization." He explained that "missionaries who were the most liberal Europeans [in Africa] before [World War II], fail to comprehend the evolution the war has wrought in minds and fact." He was elected Senegal's first president in 1960 and he immediately appointed Lebreton to develop an economic plan for the country.

While Senghor and other African Catholics met in Paris, African seminarians and priests taking theological degrees encountered one another in Rome. They, too, began to reflect on racial consciousness within the Church, publishing essays that urged European Catholics to accept both Negritude and decolonization. A priest from the Congo urged the Church to become truly African. "In the Congo," he insisted, "[the Church] should be Congolese, in the construction of the church and in the making of sacred objects, one should carefully consider the lines, the colors and all the elements of Congolese art."

Some missionary priests and bishops still held to a view that Christianity and European civilization could not be disentangled. An influential French prelate, Marcel Lefebvre, spent sixteen years in Gabon before his eventual appointment as apostolic delegate for Africa and archbishop of Dakar. Lefebvre thought it obvious that European Catholic culture shielded Africans from communism and an Islam that depended upon "fanaticism, collectivism, and the enslavement of the weak."

Other European and North American missionaries viewed their work differently. Historian Elizabeth Foster, in her superb *African Catholic*, details a fascinating debate among French clergy in Paris in the 1950s on whether Catholics had a "duty to decolonize." A group of African Catholic students based in Paris authored a remarkable manifesto that reached the front page of *Le Monde*:

We, the Catholic students of Black Africa in France, reaffirm our desire to stay simultaneously entirely Christian and entirely African; we cannot, in any circumstances or under any pressure, choose between these two loyalties.... We affirm our attachment to the natural right of African peoples to self-determination [and] [w]e ask French Catholics to make the necessary effort to understand the demands of this double loyalty to the church and to Africa.

Archbishop Lefebvre found such arguments a "serious problem." Along with his allies he stressed the benefit to Africans of colonial administration by "peoples more privileged than they." In the final days of the papacy of Pius XII, this view received a hearing, and Lefebvre helped draft the first ever encyclical on the subject of Africa, *Fidei donum*. Even by the standards of 1957, the document's paternalism was glaring. The pope applauded Africans now "reaching out toward the highest civilization of our times" but continued to worry about the continent's "heathen multitudes."

A muted response came from African Catholic students, two hundred of whom had gathered in Rome the weekend of the encyclical's release. "Should not the Church take a solemn position

against colonialism?” Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) asked. The students met with top Vatican officials, but an ailing Pius XII declined to join them.

A parallel dynamic of Catholic decolonization also became evident in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, Horacio de la Costa had graduated from an elite Jesuit high school in Manila in the 1930s. Interned during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II, he obtained a PhD in history from Harvard after the war. He soon became the first Filipino leader of the Jesuits, succeeding American Jesuits who had taken on leadership roles after the 1898 American occupation of the islands. His scholarly passion, even when writing on events in the sixteenth century, was the origins of a Filipino nationalist consciousness. As early as 1952, he insisted that Catholicism could no longer be viewed as a Western import but instead as belonging “fully as much to Asia as to Europe.”

In Indonesia after 1945, Dutch Catholic Church officials and political leaders scrambled to sustain the country as a colony by warning of “chaos” should a nascent independence movement succeed. But Indigenous Catholic support for an independent republic proved more influential. The first native Indonesian bishop, Albertus Soegijapranata, played a crucial role. An aristocrat (and Jesuit) from Java, Soegijapranata became the region’s most important Catholic figure during the World War II Japanese occupation (when Dutch Catholics were imprisoned or placed under house arrest). He developed contacts with republican leaders, some of whom were Catholic. Eventually Soegijapranata cajoled Dutch Catholic leaders into accepting the new republic and arranged for official recognition from the Vatican.

Bishops and missionaries from the Global South almost uniformly supported the biggest single change authorized by the council: the shift from the Latin Mass to liturgy in the vernacular.

Vietnamese Catholic students, like their African Catholic contemporaries, used scholarships from the French imperial government to make their way to Paris in the 1930s. After the war and the Japanese occupation, Bishop Ngô Đình Thục rallied the Vietnamese bishops to support calls for Vietnamese independence from France. In this more nationalist setting, French missionary bishops and clergy came under attack from Vietnamese Catholics as “undesirables and troublemakers, if not enemies of the nation.”

Bishop Ngô Đình Thục’s brother, Ngô Đình Diệm, became the first president of South Vietnam after the split of the country into North and South in 1954. Ngô Đình Diệm’s alliances with American military and political leaders in the 1950s, as well as New York’s Cardinal Francis Spellman, are well documented, as are his own authoritarian instincts. Another Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, initially admired Diệm for “holding the country together.” But Kennedy-administration officials, frustrated by continued instability within South Vietnam and Diệm’s unpopularity as a Catholic leader in a majority-Buddhist country, condoned a coup led by South Vietnamese generals. Captured while hiding in a Catholic Church, Diệm was assassinated in November 1963.

This emergence of Indigenous Catholic leaders—in West Africa, the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Vietnam—fueled some of the discussions at the Second Vatican Council. In contrast to Pius XII’s caution, Pope John XXIII unequivocally welcomed the “attainment of political independence

by the peoples of Asia and Africa.” He had served in Paris as Vatican ambassador or nuncio in the late 1940s and understood the aspirations of African and Vietnamese Catholics. He met with not only Léopold Senghor but other Africans in the months before the council.

Bishops and missionaries from the Global South almost uniformly supported the biggest single change authorized by the council: the shift from the Latin Mass to liturgy in the vernacular. One of the African bishops urged that the text on the liturgy drop the word “Western” since the Church was not, and never had been, limited to the West. “The victory of the vernacular in the church liturgy,” Karl Rahner later argued, “signals unmistakably the coming-to-be of a world Church whose individual churches exist with a certain independence in their respective cultural spheres, inculturated, and no longer a European export.” Archbishop Lefebvre, the defender of French colonialism in the 1950s, bitterly opposed the vernacular liturgy and would lead a major schism after the council, demanding the retention of the pre-1962 Latin rite.

Just after the council, Fr. Lebet and Barbara Ward helped Paul VI draft his 1967 social encyclical, *Populorum progressio*. The pope stressed the importance of “integral human development” and described “a type of capitalism” in bleak terms. The document was received rapturously in Latin America, where it informed the development of liberation theology.

The Wall Street Journal, by contrast, described *Populorum progressio* as “warmed over Marxism.” The text fell into eclipse in the 1980s and 1990s. Access to global markets, far more than development programs, brought hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in East Asia, especially, but also in Latin America. Communist governments in eastern Europe and then the Soviet Union itself collapsed. One of communism’s most influential opponents, Pope John Paul II, understood spiritual freedom as inseparable from economic freedom. Communism denied both.

This post-1989 confidence now seems premature. Inequality has increased to dangerous levels not only within wealthy nations such as the United States but between poor regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and more affluent parts of the world. Pope Francis frequently cites *Populorum progressio*. And while Catholic libertarians in the United States scoff at climate change, Francis’s environmental encyclical, *Laudato si’*, laments an obsession with economic growth. It is now the most influential Church document of the past sixty years.

Francis, too, is a man of the Global South, with experience working in the poorest neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. His moral sensibility is traditional: opposed to the death penalty, abortion, and gay marriage (although more welcoming than any previous pope to gay Catholics). But he is skeptical of free-market nostrums. Fellow Catholic Joe Biden placed a photo of himself with Pope Francis on his desk in the Oval Office only minutes after his inauguration. Biden delights in the fact that the pope has encouraged him to keep taking Communion even as some American bishops scheme to deny Biden the sacrament because of his pro-choice position on abortion. Still, Biden is not the American politician who quotes Pope Francis on the economy with the greatest enthusiasm. That would be Bernie Sanders.

An oddity of the moment is that two of the world’s most successful Anglophone writers happen to be Nigerian Catholics. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ancestors converted to Catholicism in the 1920s under the tutelage of Irish Catholic missionaries. As a child, her family attended Mass every

Sunday at the Catholic chapel at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, and she vividly recalls singing in Igbo and English, as well as “gold pendants at women’s throats, their headscarves flared out like the wings of giant butterflies; men’s caftans crisply starched; children in frilly socks and uncomfortable clothes.” Her adult relationship to Catholicism is fraught but enduring, since “to be raised Roman Catholic is to be inducted into a culture that clings, that slides between your soul’s crevices and stays.” Characters in her fiction visit a Lourdes shrine and claim to see the Virgin Mary. A Nigerian priest travels to work in Germany because of that country’s clergy shortage. The villain of her first novel is a censorious and abusive Catholic father tied to a colonial vision of the Church; a heroine is an aunt whose Catholicism is more humane. Adichie declares herself “proud” of Pope Francis since he “seems to value the person as much as the institution.”

Another Nigerian Catholic writer, Uwem Akpan, trained as a Jesuit. His stories reveal the world through the eyes of children. One makes a dangerous journey through Catholic and Muslim regions of Nigeria. Another clutches the family crucifix while evading warring mobs in Rwanda. “I think fiction allows us to sit for a while,” he told an interviewer, “with people we would rather not meet.” His emphasis on the vulnerable people of a continent in turmoil rests upon the final document of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (1965), and especially its famous first line, frequently referenced by Pope Francis: “the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.”

In 1961, as decolonization accelerated, a young Joseph Ratzinger predicted that “we cannot yet imagine the riches to come when the charisms of Asia and Africa make their contributions to the whole Church.” Now, the Nigerian Cardinal John Onaiyekan echoes Francis in seeing “the hand of God in the process of globalization.”

What will the next sixty years bring? Perhaps some of the divisions among Catholics, especially in the United States, will dissipate, less because of unanticipated resolutions and more because the world, and the Church, will have moved on. A new generation may place more emphasis on Pope Francis’s call to be “citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond.”

This article is excerpted from Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis, published in September, 2022, by W.W. Norton.

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