

THE CONSISTENT DECLINE IN CATHOLIC POPULATION IN GHANA

A PROPOSAL TO REVERSE THE TREND

I. INTRODUCTION

I am certain that many Catholics received with anguish and disappointment the 2021 report on the decline of the population of Catholics in Ghana as published by the Ghana Statistical Service in November last year. To many keen observers of the Ghanaian religious space, the report did not come as a surprise because the 2021 Population and Housing Census followed a similar trend that has been associated with the reduction of the number of Catholics after the 1970 census.

In this time of “grief” the natural instinct of many people will be to start another blame game as we have done all these years without putting in place any real and feasible plan after each census. However, as others may have articulated, the consistent decline can easily be halted if we all begin to do the right thing. Doing the appropriate thing will see the Church register a substantial growth at the next census.

To begin with, the Catholic Church in Ghana does not need to reinvent the wheel. The numerous documents of the church, local and universal, are replete with rich materials that can help reverse the downward trend of our population. Though we have the material, the missing link has been our inability to select just a few specific issues that speak to the contemporary moment against the backdrop of the upsurge of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, which ever since its appearance on the Ghanaian

religious landscape, has resulted in the consistent decline of the membership of the Catholic Church.

Scholarly research has shown that this stream of Christianity is what many Africans would like to affiliate with. No wonder, Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity is described as the religion of the 21st century. Why? Because it appears to address the religious worldview of the African and is offering answers to questions that are being asked.

Interestingly, one of the earliest documented warning signs that foretold of the challenge that this stream of Christianity would pose to the mainline/historic churches, which includes the Catholic Church, was highlighted by Fr. Henk C. J. Bonke, then the Executive Secretary of the Department of Pastoral Care of the National Catholic Secretariat, Accra, in a paper titled "Memorandum on the Catholic Charismatic Movement in Ghana." That was in the 1970s.

Admittedly, the theological-pastoral measures we have taken since then have not been able to halt this disturbing phenomenon where Catholics keep leaving the Church and joining the Pentecostal-Charismatics. Formal and informal discourses point to the fact that unless we put in place pragmatic measures (and let us not forget that the belief of many Ghanaian Christians hinges on pragmatism), the next population and housing census will, without sounding as a prophet of doom, see the number of Catholics dropping further to a single digit.

What is needed to be done is to carve for ourselves a *systematic programme of action* that clearly spells out the *specific issues* that must engage our attention, the *objectives*,

and the *concrete actions* we must take so as to achieve our objectives, within a *determined time frame*. We will have to commit ourselves and work strenuously on them. Since “heaven helps those who help themselves,” it is the high expectation that we will this time succeed in our concerted evangelization mission. We can then have inner peace, smile heartily, and take pride in our contributions to the growth of the Church. And when researchers like Pew Research Centre state that the continent of Africa has the fastest growing Catholic population in the world, we can hilariously raise our hands and proudly say we played a part in making it happen.

In these brief recommendations, I will first give three excerpts which contain major issues that we appear to have paid little attention to. My conviction is that they must constitute the *framework* as we set out on a “re-branding” mission. Second, I will list some essential and intentional pastoral areas and issues that must constantly engage our attention as a Church, and third, conclude with a prayer request.

In making these proposals, I wish to indicate that I took inspiration from Pope Francis’ exhortation to the church to “abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way;’” and his invitation to “everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 33).

II. THREE KEY EXCERPTS

- “For the vision is a witness for the appointed time, a testimony to the end, it will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late” (Habakkuk 2, 3).
- “Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the *actual people* to whom it is addressed, if it does not *use their language, their signs and symbols*, if it does not *answer the questions they ask*, if it does not have an *impact on their concrete life*” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63; emphasis mine).
- “Our ministry makes many demands on us. The effective preaching of the Gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who has faith (Rom. 1,16), requires our constant efforts in *going out* to the people with a deep understanding of their *culture*, their *pastoral needs* and the *pressures put on them by the modern world*” (Address by Pope John Paul II to the Catholic Bishops of Ghana, May 9, 1980, during his landmark visit to Ghana. Emphasis mine).

In sum, the three quotes, as argued, must form the bedrock of our framework. First, we have to draw for the Catholic Church in Ghana a VISION DOCUMENT which clearly spells out the INTENTIONAL STRATEGIES for our use for a specified period of time. A vision aims at a better future; it reminds that the status quo—what we have been doing all these while---are not helping us and that there should be a paradigm shift from the

discontentment that has characterized the approach to the task of the proclamation of the Gospel.

Like the Church of Pentecost with its Five-Year Vision Document Covering The Period 2018—2023, dubbed VISION 2023, we can also have, for example, a Five-Year Vision Document with solid implementation strategies to help achieve our objectives. With VISION 2023 which builds on the previous vision document, it is not surprising that the Church of Pentecost, which falls under the typology of classical Pentecostal churches, like the Assemblies of God, is the fastest growing church in Ghana.

Second, the excerpts above are literally pleading that our Vision Document must focus on:

- the actual people who are the targets of our evangelization efforts.
- the culture of the people.
- the pressures of the contemporary time.
- the questions the people are asking (not the questions we presume they are asking).
- the pastoral needs of the people.
- making an impact on the concrete life of the people.

III. PROVISIO

- We must do away with the mentality that entertains *triumphalism* and *clericalism*. These two negative notions are not only hurting the Body of Christ but also retarding its growth.

- The pastoral richness of the role of religious and lay faithful calls for continuous collaboration in the ministry of the clergy.
- We have to keep in mind the place of *African religious worldview* on the thoughts and actions of many Africans. Our worldview is influenced by our culture; it is fundamental to our understanding of who we are. One significant element that underpins our worldview is *fear*. Fear literally dictates and controls the lives of countless people. Many of the early missionaries did not take the African worldview seriously. Sadly, some of us seem to be following a similar trajectory even though the overwhelming majority of the clergy serving the church in Ghana these contemporary times are Africans.

IV. SOME VITAL PASTORAL ACTIVITIES

The major pastoral areas I recommend are:

- **PREACHING**

We must all work hard and improve on our preaching ministry. This is a vital area where a number of us are blamed for “poorly prepared, often stale, and largely irrelevant homilies that are fueling the mass exodus of people from the Church.” Fr. Joshua J. Whitfield candidly points out in his book *The Crisis of Bad Preaching*, published in 2019, that our poor preaching has brought failures and crisis to the church, and that it is unworthy of God and our mission. It is therefore urgent that we find new approaches to preparation and delivery of homilies.

- **TEACHING**

This includes Catechesis, Bible Studies/Sharing, Formation, etc.

- **HEALING AND DELIVERANCE**

Some persons are prejudiced against healing and deliverance activities. Ironically, more than a quarter of Jesus' ministry was spent on this essential pastoral area. The bias may be attributed to the fact that this important ministry has largely remained unexplored. The time has come for us to include healing and deliverance activities in our ministry.

- **VISITATIONS**

Any place where people are must be seen as fertile grounds for us to bring the Good News. As seminarians on pastorals, we noticed the positive impacts of home visitations; a practice that some priests though few, have maintained as essential part of their ministry. A recent facebook video of a young priest in cassock from a diocese in Ghana doing home visits is heart-warming.

- **WITNESSING**

All must aim at being authentic witnesses of Christ. This means that we pursue holiness vigorously.

V. OTHER SIGNIFICANT AREAS AND ISSUES

A. HOPE

The giving of *hope* must underline all these essential pastoral activities. In other words, the pastoral engagements must be proclaimed as Good News, in perfect example of Jesus whose words and actions brought hope to people.

B. SPONTANEOUS/SIMULTANEOUS PRAYERS

Prayer intentions at liturgical and para-liturgical celebrations must speak to the concrete life situations of our people since it is a truism that many of the bidding prayers, as they are now, are too abstract for the liking of our people.

The question has often been asked: Is it not possible for the Church in Ghana to seek permission from Rome so that at least once in a month at a Sunday liturgical celebration, bidding prayers are said simultaneously? This way of praying affords everyone in the worshipping community to also pray in his/her own language/dialect. It has positive impacts on the psyche and emotions of the praying community. Research shows that many Africans are at home with this mode of praying.

C. EXERCISING THE CHARISMS

Those endowed with the charisms must be encouraged to exercise them for the renewing and building up of the church. As we are aware, the Holy Spirit endows some members of the church with extraordinary gifts while he gives others ordinary gifts. None is more important than the other. Unfortunately, we have tended to lay emphasis on the extraordinary gifts to the near neglect of the ordinary charisms.

From Scripture, Tradition, and the Teaching Office of the Church, we can count not less than twenty (20) charisms. Hence, I believe the challenge posed by Pentecostal-Charismatics must prompt us to take seriously the relevance of the charisms for the mission of the Church as espoused by great churchmen like

Cardinals Joseph L. Suenens and Raniero Cantalamessa. The ecclesiological import of the charisms must be stressed since that is the reason for which they are given.

D. OUTREACH COMMITTEES

Though all members of the church are to be formed as missionary disciples, it is recommended that the different levels of the church---outstations, mission stations, parishes, deaneries and dioceses---should have Outreach Committees.

These will play the role of "spiritual foot soldiers" that will "canvass vigorously" for new members for the church including bringing back lapsed and former Catholics.

E. CHURCH PLANTING

This should be an essential part of our strategy where we work at planting specified new churches within the given period.

F. GROTTOS AND PRAYER CENTRES

These should be strengthened such that they become places where Catholics and non-Catholics can visit for worship and for spiritual, physical, and emotional healing.

G. INTENTIONAL TARGET GROUPS

- CHILDREN—At Children Liturgy; Basic Schools and JHS
- YOUNG PEOPLE---At SHS; Tertiary Institutions
- WOMEN
- MEN

H. MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP

All of us should be formed as Missionary Disciples. Every Parish/Outstation/Mission Station must work assiduously to increase the membership of the Church by about twenty percent (20%) during the five-year period. This is achievable.

I. EXISTING CHURCH SOCIETIES, ASSOCIATIONS & GROUPS

The existing church societies, associations and groups must be taken through re-orientation to make them include missionary discipleship as the core mandate of their ministry.

J. CATHOLIC CHARISMATIC RENEWAL

Conscious that the 21st Century is one of Charismatic-Pentecostal Christianity, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) should have a major role in our plans and strategies. Studies have shown that in places where the CCRs have been assigned responsibilities in the evangelizing mission in line with their charisms, those parish communities have experienced encouraging spiritual revivals and growth.

While acknowledging tensions that sometimes arise in some parishes between priests and the CCR, it ought to be stated that many of these lapses are due to misconceptions about the essence of the charismatic gifts and the hierarchical gifts, and the corresponding relationships that should exist between these two dimensions of the church.

K. SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

I believe we have all heard the sarcastic statement that implies that when one is in need of physical nourishment one must have recourse to the Catholic Church but when in need of spiritual nourishment, one must seek it outside the Catholic Church.

Luckily, statements like this have not deterred the church from continuing with its mission of providing for the physical well-being of humanity. The provisions of amenities and infrastructure to alleviate poverty and enhance socio-economic status of humanity must be intensified during the period of rejuvenation. All these must strategically be tied to evangelization.

L. SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

The various means of social communications should be utilized to drive our mission.

M. FASTING AND PRAYER

That at least twice in the year (this excludes Ash Wednesday and Good Friday) a Week of Prayer and Fasting should be declared for members of the Church. The practice where some of us stress the canonical fasting age bracket of 18-59 years on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday is not helping the cause of the spiritual growth of the church. Besides health-related issues, we should all be encouraged to fast on declared weeks of prayer and fasting.

N. INTENSIVE EDUCATION AND PERIODIC TRAINING AND FORMATION

Since what we want to embark on may be the first in living memory for the entire Catholic Church in Ghana, there will be the need to embark on massive education to bring the vast majority of Catholics on board.

O. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

As in almost all vision documents, functional Monitoring and Evaluation Committees must be formed.

P. PRAYING FOR SIGNS AND WONDERS

A salient intention that should be part of the private and communal prayers of Christ's faithful is to pray like Pope John XXIII when he asked the church to pray prior to the beginning of the Second Vatican Council: "O Holy Spirit, renew your wonders in this our day, as by a new Pentecost."

As clergy, we must not shy away from praying that signs and wonders should accompany our lives and ministries. The time has come for us to say bye to this shyness.

Q. WHEN DO WE BEGIN?

The ongoing Synod on Synodality and Pope Francis' declaration of 2025 as a Jubilee Year are precious gifts for us to launch our vision document. We can use the rest of this year (2022) for our Bishops to do consultations and discernments, and the printing of the vision document.

The take-off period could be *January 2023*, with an accompanying firm assurance to our lay faithful that we (the clergy) have resolved, with their support and collaboration, to grow the church membership and bequeath to the next generation a more committed, vibrant, and spirit-filled Church.

VI. CONCLUSION

In one of his presentations to the papal household, Cardinal Cantalamessa observed that since our contemporary situation has much in common with that of the apostles, we should also unite ourselves to their prayer and pray like them:

“Come, Holy Spirit! Truly, today also in this city, in this our world.... all the powers—culture, prosperity, ideology, what is outside of man and what is within him—conspire practically to eliminate from the midst of human beings God, Jesus Christ, and his Church. Lord, turn your gaze upon us, today also extend your hand so that cures, miracles, and wonders are performed in the name of Jesus, because we have become distracted, deaf, and hard of heart and the words no longer suffice. Let us have the *courage* to *ask* you again for signs and wonders not for us, but for your glory and for the spread of your kingdom. It is true, you have told us that such signs are useful ‘for unbelievers’ (I Cor. 14,22). But our world is again— or has become once more—in great part unbelieving. For this reason, we need some of your signs that might convince the world or at least reclaim its attention. You have promised us to work together with those who preach and to confirm their words ‘through accompanying signs (Mk.16, 20).”

The wishes of Cardinal Cantalamessa as he prayed before the Holy Father and his close collaborators resonate with me. These are exactly what I honestly and deeply desire and wish for every one of us—Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Religious, Consecrated Persons, Catechists, etc.---who are privileged to serve the Church in our various ministries and apostolates; that signs and wonders may accompany our preaching, teaching, healing, deliverance, visitation, witnessing, Eucharistic celebration, celebration of the Sacraments, and other liturgical and para-liturgical celebration and activity.

Come, Holy Spirit! Renew and increase the membership of your One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in Ghana, and help us be on fire for the work of the new evangelization all to your greater glory, honour, and praise. AMEN!!!

BY: REV. FR. FRANCIS ADOBOLI

(francisadoboli@yahoo.com)

CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF ACCRA

MAY 13, 2022