

## **Inheritance and spiritual fruitfulness of the "Lavigerie Family" in Africa**

The subject to be examined is a major one. To deal with it, I have chosen to take a panoramic view of the missionary heritage of the White Fathers and White Sisters from my small experience as a diocesan priest, an inheritor of the Missionaries of Africa. And I will undertake this reading through the prism of the systematic and systemic theology of mission, fluctuating between looking back and missionary perspectives.

The title of my paper immediately suggests an interesting avenue for reflection on the patrimony/matrimony heritage of the "Lavigerie Family" in Africa. Indeed, the term "family" attracts my attention, and by this concept I mean the domestic entity composed of a man and a woman with or without a natural or adopted child. This domestic sanctuary, this unit of production and reproduction, this place/ link of relationships that is the traditional African family, aims to grow in quantity and quality by maintaining compact and intact reciprocal, circular and network-like links fostered by individual freedom and community solidarity. One of the mechanisms that some peoples in Africa and elsewhere use to sustain and expand the lineage is the process of empowering a young man and a young woman as they reach maturity and a marriageable age. During a highly symbolic ritual, parents officially give their children symbols of virility and femininity as if to say to them: "From now on, you are responsible for yourselves, you are no longer under our protection". They now become autonomous in a qualified dependence on their fathers and mothers, independent but maintaining certain obligations towards their parents. What the child inherits essentially is not monetary wealth in cash, in kind or in charisma, but the tools that he/she will use to master and achieve his/her self-determination and self-sufficiency.

Starting from these socio-anthropological considerations, I am going to turn our theme into a study question by drawing attention to some similarities that are close to it: what is the spiritual and missionary fruitfulness of the fathers and mothers of the "Lavigerie Family" after 150 years of active presence in Africa and what legacy have they left? Have they succeeded in meeting the challenge of empowering local church communities in Africa? In strictly missiological terms, what motivates the missionary obligation to bequeath - as far as Lavigerie's sons/daughters are concerned on the one hand - and the privilege of inheriting - as far as the churches in Africa are concerned?

As a somewhat cursory answer to these questions, I can affirm that the "Lavigerie Family" has contributed to the creation of the Church-Family of God in Africa, a "Family of Families" Church, a vast missionary field to be harvested as well as the material, spiritual and personal resources to carry out the work there. In doing so, the "Lavigerie Family" follows in the wake of the divine processions and missions of the Trinitarian family of which the Church-Family of God is the embodiment. Isn't the mission both transmission and tradition? Far from being a human initiative, it is above all *Missio Trinitatis* and it is from this *Actio Dei* that the *Ecclesiae Missions* derive (cf. Ad Gentes 6), by which is meant the missionary works and tracks of the Church-Family of God in Africa and in the world. The tri-personal God by going out of himself to realize his plan of salvation and by founding the human and divine institution that is the Church, reveals himself as the God who comes (cf. L. Legrand), the God *in exitus* (who goes out), the God *in kenosis* (who comes down), the God who ventures into the existential peripheries out of love so that humanity may be saved. In its turn, the Lavigerie Family, following in the footsteps of the Trinitarian family, gave birth to the Church-Family of God by leaving it a heritage composed of personal, material and spiritual riches.

The sons and daughters of Lavigerie have generated and continue to generate missionary personnel *ad tempus* and *ad vitam*. They worked for the development and formation of a local clergy and women's institutes animated by a missionary spirituality long before Paul VI's call in Kampala in 1969: "*Africans be your own missionaries.*" The ministerial priesthood and consecrated life are mission because they are callings from a missionary God, at the service of a Church whose nature is missionary. Together with this missionary spirituality, the community lifestyle of the sons and daughters of Lavigerie radiates and inspires both a spirituality of a communion in mission or a mission in communion. Living together as a team and in community, cooperation and collaboration between missionary subjects constitute in my opinion an eminently divine and authentically African *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*, for God is ONE but not alone, he does not act alone but in a spirit of solidarity.

Without wishing to anticipate any future communiqués, I cannot ignore the very active and significant presence of the White Sisters alongside the White Fathers. Women have never bargained away their place at the side of Christ and his apostles, teaching us that the complementarity between male and female subjects is essential to missionary fruitfulness.

Better still, if for Pope Francis, "the Church is a feminine word", mission as evangelization is just as much so and the woman with her particular genius should be a co-protagonist of the *Missiones Ecclesiae*. To what extent are women involved in our missionary activities and what is the health of missionary spirituality in communion?

One area in which the daughters/sons of Lavigerie have distinguished themselves and continue to devote themselves is human promotion with justice and peace as a *sine qua non*, of course. Depending on the context and time, the Lavigerie family's heritage in terms of integral human development is mixed. It remains irrefutable, however, that local churches in Africa have benefited from an infrastructure of buildings, furniture, archives... let us say from a considerable legacy of temporal goods.

The tragedy is that some dioceses fell into a lethargic state and even into an economic coma when the "lavigerians" left: What went wrong? Was it the weaning or the rupture of the umbilical cord that was at fault? Were these dioceses subject to a paternalistic/maternalistic regime? Or should we simply point to an opaque and chaotic management of the legacy? In any case, between greed and the harshness of methodical individualism on the one hand and the libertarian whiffs of normative holism on the other, the sons and daughters of Lavigerie have understood that the model of integral and sustainable human development most appropriate to human and ecclesial communities in Africa is that of an economy based on relationships that promote the pooling together of resources and a coalition of individual capabilities. It is this pact of interdependence and positive mutual indebtedness that binds us together in a rationality of linking set-backs and successes. And in this multilateral agreement, each party identifies and lists, identifies and itemizes its own indigenous resources that it puts at the benefit of the whole. Are the local Churches and Institutes founded by the Missionaries of Africa aware of their wealth? Do they enjoy relative autonomy? Do they know that their poverty is not the lack of economic means, but the absence and dysfunction of solidarity links at an intra-/inter-ecclesial level?

The spirituality that animates the missionary heritage transmitted to us by the "lavigerians" is the meaning of evangelization as a prophetic dialogue between the Gospels and cultures on the one hand (inculturation) and between African cultures on the other hand (interculturality).

Inculturation as the incarnation of the Christian faith in cultures and the evangelization of cultures was not an obvious starting point for the Lavigerian missionaries.

We understand the more or less the robust clashes between certain missionaries and certain peoples. Fortunately, from adaptation to accommodation, we have entered the process of inculturation, whose model is the very kenosis of Christ. In our current global village in the midst of globalization, interculturality as a promoter of a symbiosis and osmosis between cultures and human communities is a serious and thorny issue that questions and challenges the building of the Church-Family of God. There are many issues and challenges for the unity and mission of ecclesial communities called to live unity in plurality. To avoid our differences turning into disputes and our diversities into adversities, the equation should be approached from a theological perspective and the viewpoint of the theological virtues in the light of recognition and knowledge, of mutual trust, the charity of agape and freedom, and mutual benefits advocated and promoted by the gifts of faith, hope and charity.

It is under this condition that the Church will be a true Christian and spiritual family, a meta/transcultural *oikumenè* where all cultures are welcomed, respected and shared. In this sense, the Lavigerie family, by its international and intercultural character, extends Pentecost as a Cenacle where the Kingdom of justice and peace is already in action. Lavigerie's heirs would overcome terrorism, violent radicalism and inter-community conflicts if they put *shalom* at the heart of their missionary projects.

In closing, I invite you to pay tribute to the indelible memory of these martyrs, these heralds of the Gospel, these heroes of our missionary history, these witnesses whose blood continues to fertilize the being and missionary action of the Church-Family of God. Ultimately, these seeds that have fallen on African soil are both the foundation and the very essence of the missionary heritage and the spiritual fruitfulness of our ecclesial communities.

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