

DIMENSIONS OF THE PARISH AS THE FOREMOST PLACE FOR IMPLEMENTING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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The 1917 Code of Canon Law presented the parish as an institution or organisation set up to serve the spiritual needs of the faithful and the material upkeep of the pastor. It was importantly considered as a pastoral benefice primarily for the determination and assignment of revenue to the pastor. The Code emphasised the place and importance of the pastor oftentimes to the neglect of the other members of the parish. The traditional parish was determined on the basis of geography (territory) and on whether it had sufficient income to provide for clergy, Church buildings and essential programmes. The parish was seen as the parish priests' property and the faithful were often distant and passive. It presents a picture of a drama stage where the pastor or parish priest was the principal actor while the faithful constitute the audience who had to watch and clap hands. This system of

parish ministry went with a lot of limitations.

1. The Ecclesiology of the Parish

1.1. The Scenario from the Second Vatican Council:

The Second Vatican Council set out to reinvigorate the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; and to strengthen whatever can help to call all mankind into the Church's fold.¹ One place that provides a forum for the implementation of these values is the parish. The Council's emphasis on the parish therefore, has shifted from the institutional to person-centred values, where the members, both priests and laity, can actuate their rights, duties and obligations, and can exercise them for the dynamic pastoral and spiritual benefits of members of the community. Thus, the parish provides ample room for the realization of new theological thrusts that present the Church as a communion (*koinonia*) and as a family.²

The parish, as a unit of the people of God, can rightly be described as a communion. The Council consequently considered it in the light of “community” and “family”, concepts that should ultimately also engender the attitude of collaboration and collaborative ministry.

1.2. The Parish in the Light of the 1983 Code of Canon Law

The notion of parish given in canon law is that of “a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor as its proper pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”³

For the purpose of this paper, there are four essential

elements to be identified here:

- a) a group of Christ's faithful, who are together in a stable manner;
- B) the fact that this community is not independent but only a part of the particular church;
- c) a pastor who presides over this people as their proper leader and guide;
- d) the fact that this pastor of the parish functions under the authority of the diocesan bishop or the bishop of the particular church.⁴

Canon law prescribes that a parish is to be territorial, embracing all the members of Christ's faithful of a given territory.⁵ As a community, all the members of the parish have one role or the other to play to ensure that the pastoral care of souls is properly carried out, in such a way that the members of the parish community may meaningfully feel the impact of the parish in the actual realities of their lives. This is where the Church calls for the creative initiatives and commitment of the pastor in the understanding and discharge of his pastoral responsibilities. The present code equally makes the manner of operating a parish more flexible depending on the decision of the Bishop. Thus it is now possible to have a parish entrusted to team of priests with collective responsibility, or parish entrusted even to a deacon, etc.

Some aspects of the traditional descriptions of the parish such as its territoriality, the pastoral office, stability, and the care of souls are still considered essential characteristics. This is based on the strong reasoning that 'communion in Christ' could not effectively operate in the absence of ecclesial structures. Possibly for this reason, the new ecclesial concept of the parish

community should be realised in the contest of a juridical structure, which is almost externally similar to that of the 1917 code of canon law. The dynamics and full implications of communion in the parish are however, yet to be fully realised. In most cases, parishes are too large to provide an effective experience of Christian communion, and have been criticised variously for a supermarket approach to the sacraments, depersonalised approach to pastoral ministry or overwhelming burden placed on the clergy. In many of such parishes the gospel has not yet found a proportionate place in the social life of the faithful.

1.3. The Parish in the Light of the First Synod of Bishops on the Church in Africa

For John Paul II, the image of “family” would be most appropriate for parish life in Africa as it emphasises care for others, solidarity, mutual acceptance, dialogue and trust. He noted that the thrust in the orientation of new evangelisation was aimed at building the Church as “family of God on mission”, a Church that would avoid ethnocentrism and excessive particularistic considerations while encouraging reconciliation and communion between different ethnic groups that favour solidarity and mutual sharing. These are the dynamic social values usually found in several traditional African societies. When the parish is built up in this way, the bond of relationship is that of a common attachment to Christ, from whom all the members draw their new identity, vitality and mission. This bond emphasises the mutual relationship among the members, which is based on the love of God and love of neighbour.⁶

Thus, John Paul II presented the parish as “the ordinary

place where the faithful worship and live their Christian life”. It is the place which manifests the *communion of various groups and movements*, which find in it spiritual sustenance and material support. He then encouraged priests and lay people to ensure that parish life expresses the Church as Family, where the members devote “themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).⁷ The parish therefore, is a well united community where all the members should actively undertake their own assignments for the good and mission of the family.

2. Some Essential Elements in the Dynamic Operations of the Parish

The unfolding dimensions of the ecclesiology of the Church open up new vistas of possibilities that make the parish the most dynamic place for the nurturing of Christian life and for the accomplishment of her mission on earth. The parish is a home to different people of all cultures and professions. It must be a place bustling with various spiritual, pastoral and social activities. It is the ideal place for Christian formation, spiritual encounters, prayers and various forms of apostolate as people regularly converge there. They organize themselves and embark on activities that promote the good of the universal and particular church, the parish, the families and the individual persons.

2.1. The Parish as Principal Centre for Christian Formation

The parish is the central place for the formation of the faithful. The faithful who gather regularly there are provided opportunities to be formed in Christian doctrines to enable them know and encounter Christ and be able to live lives of faith. The

parish priest has the particular responsibility to ensure this formation.⁸ They do this through the preaching of the word of God and the faithful explanation to the faithful of the “teaching of the *magisterium* of the Church concerning the dignity and freedom of the human person, the unity, stability and duties of the family, the people's social obligations and the ordering of temporal affairs according to the plan established by God.”⁹ He is called upon to use the facilities of the parish for the formation of the laity so that they can be “instructed in the truths of faith, especially by means of the homily on Sundays and holydays of obligation and by catechetical formation”,¹⁰ to foster the work of the apostolate and promote the spirit of the Gospel, including its relevance to social justice.

The parish priest does not, of course, undertake this task alone. He is strongly encouraged: “to avail himself of the help of clerics attached to the parish, as well as of members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life, being mindful of the character of each institute; and the assistance of lay members of Christ's faithful, especially catechists.” Canon law equally encourages all relevant persons to give their time and knowledge “to labour willingly” in this parochial endeavour of the pastor. Parents are asked to play their roles both in the parish and in their families.¹¹ It would require the personal ingenuity of the parish priest to coordinate all the possibilities and potentials of assistance that he can muster to perform his onerous parochial assignment. The greatest of the opportunities that should be explored very seriously in Christian formation is the programme for the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).¹²

2.2. The Parish as principal Centre for profound Spiritual Encounter with God

The parish is the principal centre for a more profound spiritual encounter with God by being involved in spiritual and liturgical activities. This is the principal reason why the pastoral care of members of Christ's faithful is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor.¹³ The pastor, working with other clerics and assistants, is obliged to ensure the proclamation of the word of God in its entirety, to ensure that the Blessed Eucharist is the centre of the parish assembly of the faithful, to ensure the devout celebration of the sacraments, to lead them to prayer, including prayer in their families, and to participate actively in sacred liturgy. The parish is also the place where the care of the weak, the infirm, the homebound, the children, youths, young and adult couples, men and women are all given assistance through pastoral and spiritual initiatives.¹⁴ The pastor is empowered to perform several other pastoral functions which combine to make the parish the authentic centre for spiritual encounters with God. Although the pastor may be involved in several other activities, his principal work however, remains the salvation of souls in the parish, as this is the principal responsibility of the Church.¹⁵

The empowerment of the laity to participate more actively in the mission of the Church has brought greater vigour to their spiritual life in the parishes since the Second Vatican Council and now they can undertake initiatives on specific apostolic actions,¹⁶ by contributing to the building up of the Body of Christ,¹⁷ and making serious efforts to lead a holy life while striving to promote the growth of the Church and its continual sanctification.¹⁸ The numerous pious and spiritual lay apostolate groups thriving with various spiritual activities in

several parishes are examples of how far the vision of the Church has actually taken root. So many lay groups are directly involved in planning and organizing programmes for their spiritual wellbeing. Consequently, several parishes have commenced spiritual empowerment programmes to encourage ongoing encounters with their God. The parish has enormous spiritual potentials for both pastors and parishioners who should collaborate to make their parishes authentic centres for spiritual transformation.

2.3. The Parish as principal Centre for Christian Social Interactions

The parish is also a centre for more intense Christian social interactions and self-realization. The social and political initiatives which the social doctrine of the Church calls on the faithful to assume may not really materialize unless there is a forum for organizing and mobilizing the faithful for this. The Church calls on the faithful to take proactive initiatives on issues of peace, reconciliation, justice, ethnicity, political issues and several others. The parish provides a forum of meeting, discussing and taking initiatives on key issues on the social doctrine of the Church. Thus, the initiatives and actions of some pious societies are typical examples of social and political initiatives helping both Catholics and non-Catholics to cope with life. In a world where the enemies of the values that the Church holds dear abound, parishes cannot stay unconcerned.

Ultimately, the parish is the place where almost all the social teachings of the Church are not only expressed and taught, but deliberate efforts are made to initiate and implement them as dimensions of the Church's mission. Alongside this, are the

several ecumenical initiative and activities taking place in the country. The type of ecumenism practiced in Nigeria is not in its entirety that envisioned in the code of canon law. The parishes provide the actual meeting places where discussions are held and definite actions initiated. Several such social initiatives will continue to be taken to promote the Christian mission, and the parish is an important place for this.

2.4. The Parish as a Unit for Ecological Sustainability

The parish would usually have some definite landed properties, which could be located in one or several places within the parish territory.¹⁹ One of such landed property is the one often known as the parish centre, where the members congregate for worship, catechesis and several other parochial activities. Other landed properties could be used for other purposes like farming, social activities, schooling or other socio-economic operations of the parish.

The parish is therefore a unit of the ecosystem, an ecological community which requires the solicitous management of available natural endowments and resources contained in it. Community ecology examines how interactions among species and their environment affect the presence, distribution and diversity of species within a given community. The parish is an ecological community in so far as it is made up of living and non-living organisms whose regular interactions have effect on the health and wellbeing of those who intermingle there.

As an ecological unit whose natural ecological endowments should be controlled by the creative ingenuity of the community, it should be considered as part and parcel of the

pastor's responsibility to join in the campaign and in fostering initiatives for the sustainability of the ecological system.²⁰ It is therefore, obvious that ecological sustainability is also a very important and indispensable aspect in this responsibility.

3. The Canonical Structure for Parish Organization and Administration.

3.1. The Pastor, the Assistant Pastors and other Collaborative Assistants:

A pastor is a presbyter who is entrusted with the pastoral care of members of Christ's faithful.²¹ He is the proper parish priest of the parish entrusted to him and exercises pastoral care over the parish community.²² The pastor represents the parish as a juridical person. Some parishes have assistant priests.²³ One characteristic of the parish considered in the present code is the abolition of non-residential and immovable pastors. Thus, the diocesan bishop is empowered to be able to create or suppress parishes as he may find appropriate for the good of souls. It is equally possible to assign an assistant parish priest to meet specific spiritual needs of the faithful in those places. They differ from the pastor in administrative powers and are subject to the administrative authority of the parish priest.

Assistant pastors could also be assigned for specialised ministries in several parishes concurrently. This could be assignment to special renewal ministries, youth ministry, religious education, etc. This provides for more flexibility in appointment since priests gifted in special spiritual areas could be assigned to those areas with greater ease.

In organizing his parish according to the provisions of canon law, particular laws and the special circumstances of the

local environment to attain the salvation of souls, the pastor, in addition to striving to work harmoniously with the assistant priests, should also work with the consecrated men and women as well as with lay persons in his territory.²⁴ He sets up an organizational structure for the administration of the parish and this should include the administrative, the catechetical and liturgical staff. These could be considered primary collaborative staff that should help the pastor to get things going. In all these however, the pastor also works with the Bishop of the particular Church and the diocesan *presbyterium*. The personality and dispositions of the pastor will go a long way in determining how well the parish is organized and administered in the light of the unfolding dimensions of the parochial ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

The Parish priest is entrusted with the following responsibilities: proclamation of the word of God in its entirety, striving to know the faithful entrusted to his care. He is expected to visit families, share their cares and anxieties and, in their sorrows bring them comfort. He is to lead them in prayer, liturgical, moral and spiritual activities. He is to properly organise the faithful and promote social justice. Persons with special difficulties are to be cared for by the pastor. Special apostolate can be developed for children, youths, young couples, adults, women, intending spouses and parents. Christian life in the family is to be properly promoted in its entirety. The role and works of the laity is to be properly recognised and promoted. The sacraments are to be properly and creatively celebrated. This list however should give a vivid picture of the enormity and wide scope of work the pastor is supposed to extend his leadership competence and degree of creativity.²⁵

For the successful execution of parish programmes in the light of their magnitude and far-reaching consequences, modern organisational and administrative tools and skills have to be acquired, creatively applied with greater care taken to observe the principles of legitimate diversity, subsidiarity and shared responsibility among all the members of the community. These principles see the people of God as a community of persons, hierarchically structured but with equality of dignity. The faithful share responsibility for the life and the mission of the Church in their various parishes which thus liberates the Church for mission within the local *milieu* and provides a basis for full participation by all members in the very life and mission of the parish.

It is in the interest of any parish that qualified laypersons be trained and involved in different ways in the mission of the Church, as they unfold in the parish. This is due to the paradigm shift of the second Vatican Council which states:

Prior to the Council, the Church perceived God's guidance and direction as flowing almost entirely through the leaders the hierarchy: the pope, bishops, pastors- finally to be activated in parishes through programmes and other projects. The concept of shared responsibility changed that thinking. The theological meaning of shared responsibility is that God's truth, which provides the guidance for the Church, comes not only through the leaders but also through the people. In order for the Church to have the fullness of God's light and guidance, the people must be consulted. Thus, a totally new ministry of the People of God was born a special ministry of people and pastor together reflecting on the parish's ministerial activity and on the basis of that reflection, discerning what needs to be changed or developed in the parish to make it more faithful to what God is

calling it to be.²⁶

While the pastor continues to take final responsibility for total parish ministry, he increasingly takes on the role of a facilitator over the ministry of the people, and a sharer with the people in that ministry. Thus, pastors are called to recognize and promote the dignity and responsibility of the laity and make use of their prudent advice and assign them duties to perform.²⁷ They are to acknowledge and promote the proper role the lay persons have in the Church's mission²⁸ by fostering their apostolate groups for pious purposes. The laity should no longer be allowed to remain spectators in the Church; they have become dynamic agents of Church's existence and ministry.

To this end, considerable efforts are being made to integrate the laity in the Church by ensuring their active participation. Laity Councils and/or Lay Apostolate Councils have been established all over the world. However, the laity cannot play their roles effectively unless they have the requisite education and formation. They have been brought on board in the organization and administration of the Church, but the importance of their active involvement in the life and ministry of the Church can only be better understood and appreciated after priests and laity have had practical education about how their respective roles complement each other in the Church in general, and in the parishes in particular.

3.2. Parish Pastoral Council:

Canon law makes provision for the establishment of a pastoral council in the parish.²⁹ This council should be a representative body of Christ's faithful whose purpose is the promotion of the mission of the Church in its entirety in the

parish. It is to work in close collaboration with the pastor, giving him advice on matters pertaining to pastoral ministry.³⁰ The parish priest is an ex-officio member and is expected to be the head, presiding over its meetings in the decision-making processes. “This role”, according to Joseph A. Janicki, “cannot be surrendered or diminished nor should authority be viewed as personal power, but as genuine service to the Christian faithful exercised in a collegial way”.³¹

The parish pastoral council is different and independent of the parish finance council. This was brought about by the rough experiences in the relationship of the pastor with the parish laity between the close of the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of the present code of canon law.³² In the light of these experiences canon law modified the nature of parish council as proposed by Vatican Council II. It put forward two separate and independent councils—the pastoral and finance councils. In this way each council will face squarely specific pastoral functions.

The parish pastoral council is specifically set up to handle pastoral issues and not finances, projects or the temporal goods of the Church. The functions of the parish pastoral council are to deal with long-range and short-range objectives of the mission of the Church in such ways that meet the circumstances of the parish. Through its insights, expertise, and prudent advice, it should help the pastor to identify, implement and evaluate those pastoral initiatives and policies that best suit the spread of the gospel in the particular area. The council has only a consultative vote. Consultation here implies that the council seeks to discern the movement and the will of the Holy Spirit rather than simply voting on issues. The hallmarks of the consultative process

include 'discernment' and 'consensus building'.³³ The pastoral council is a very dynamic organ for the promotion of the pastoral ministry through various collaborative initiatives envisioned by the Vatican Council and the code of canon law. Both the parish priest and the laity members of the Council are expected to be actively and prayerfully involved up to this point.

3.3. Parish Finance Council:

The Code of Canon Law states that:

Each parish is to have a finance council which is regulated by universal law as well as by the norms issued by the diocesan bishop; in this council the Christian faithful, selected according to the same norms, aid the pastor in the administration of parish goods with due regard for the prescriptions of canon 532.³⁴

Canon 532, on the other hand, states that: “In all juridical matters, the parish priest acts in the person of the parish, in accordance with the law. He is to ensure that parish goods are administered in accordance with canons 1281-1288”. These latter canons make laws on how the temporal goods of the Church are to be acquired, administered and disposed of. The setting up of the parish finance council, moreover, is in keeping with the provision of canon 1280, which directs that every juridical person must have a council. It should be made up of finance experts, engineers, architects, surveyors, among others, who will be able give expert advice on issues of temporal goods.

This council is a group of lay people who assist the pastor in the administration of goods and services in the parish. It is to assist pastors in raising funds, planning and execution of projects, prepare budgets, financial statements, make investments, oversee church properties and manage the

available resources of the parish. It helps to ensure accountability in the parish in a world that now focuses on accountability and transparency. It helps to monitor the counting and recording of incomes and expenses and ensures that proper and accurate financial books are kept in the parish. It reviews and updates the list of parish inventory from time to time.

The finance council is distinct from the pastoral council although there is nothing preventing certain members of the parish council from acting as members of the finance council. It is equally mandatory on each parish to have one. It is the duty of the diocesan bishop to prepare guidelines or statutes to regulate how the council is to be constituted and operated. The members are to express their candid opinions during the meeting just as the pastor is expected to listen to the advice of the council and may not act contrary to it unless there are strong reasons, which he is expected to diligently explain to them, compelling him to do otherwise. According to Rev. Griffin, “The council does not make priorities or set policies. It is the pastoral council in cooperation with the staff and pastor that sets policy for the parish”.³⁵ In general terms, the Bishop is to determine how parish councils function in their dioceses. Several parishes, in fact, have already constituted finance councils and are equally operating the budget system. With a properly approved budget in place, it is not necessary that the council members must regulate or approve the day-to-day disbursement of budgeted funds, as this is a strictly administrative work to be left to the pastor and his staff.

4. Evolving Organizational Structures for Parish Administration

The structure of the parish is not static. It is constantly evolving - adopting and adapting to inputs from different parts of the world. The Code of Canon Law has already acknowledged some of these facts while recent Papal documents and declarations affirm that the principle of subsidiarity implies the acceptance of genuine initiatives of local churches dispersed around the world. These diverse structural responses indicate that the Church is growing and striving hard to adjust so that the mission of the Church could truly become the responsibility of all the baptized as foreseen by Christ and the universal Church. Some elements of this include the Basic Christian Communities; the Extra-ordinary ministers of Holy Communion; and the parish Social Welfare programmes.

4.1. Basic Christian Communities and the Zonal System:

One area where the Church is experiencing some renewal in the parish today is through the establishment of the Basic Christian Communities (BCC) and the Parish Zonal system. The difference between the two lies in the size and therefore, some slight differences in the manner of operation and administration. It was in the 1950s that the BCC was introduced in South America. It became a very powerful and successful instrument of propagating and living the gospel. It was equally successfully introduced in Eastern Africa and recently, many Nigerian parishes have also adopted it.

The Latin American Bishops analysed the BCC as
 ...a community, the Basic level Ecclesial
 Community (that) brings together families, adults

and young people, in an intimate interpersonal relationship grounded in the faith. As an ecclesial reality, it is a community of faith, hope, and charity ... It fleshes out the work of God in life through solidarity and commitment to the new commandment of the Lord; and through the service of the approved coordinators, it makes present and operative the mission of the Church and its visible community with the legitimate pastors. It is a base-level community because it is composed of relatively few members as a permanent body, like a cell of the larger community.³⁶

The Bishops of East Africa in describing the overwhelming spiritual and pastoral impacts of BCCs on evangelisation referred to them as means by which the Church is brought down to the daily life and concerns of people where they live. They noted that through them, people are helped to recognise and experience the mystery of Christ among them as “Emmanuel”; they experience sacramentally the joy and freedom of the forgiveness of their sins; and are brought alive in Jesus Christ, in an environment of fraternal love and of personal faith, with the opportunity to experience the Church as a new way of being together and saved in hope.³⁷

In Africa, the experience has been slow, but steadily, it is spreading and the universal Church has accepted it as a veritable and authentic method for the effective evangelisation of people and as a way of living-out the gospel in the actual living situations of people. It is therefore, not surprising that Pope John Paul II spoke of them as: “sign of vitality within the Church”, “instrument of formation and evangelisation”, and “solid starting point for a new society based on a 'civilisation of love'”. He concluded by referring to the communities as “means of evangelisation”, “source of new ministries” and manifestation of

“how divisions, tribalism and racism can be overcome.” In some African parishes deliberate efforts are being made to establish these “Christian cells” which should be committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love, which transcends the limits of the natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interest groups.³⁸ This has particularly gone far in Eastern Africa and several parishes are working on it in Nigeria.³⁹

4.2. Extra-Ordinary Ministers of Holy Communion:

One of the ministries being introduced presently in some dioceses in Nigeria is the Extra-ordinary Eucharistic Ministry. These ministers are lay people who have been selected by their priests, trained and installed according to the regulation laid down by the diocesan bishop. The present code of canon law allows lay people to play some role in the Church in this area in times of necessity and when there is an evident inadequacy of ministers.⁴⁰

Pope Paul VI started the modern practice of allowing layperson to distribute the Holy Eucharist in 1966 on an experimental basis. This was confirmed in 1972 and the present code has established it as part of the structure of the Church. The conditions under which lay persons may be allowed as extra-ordinary ministers of holy communion were listed by the Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments to include: 1) the absence of a priest, deacon or acolyte; 2) the inconvenience or inability of these same persons in distributing Communion due to some pastoral ministry or due to ill health or advanced age; and 3) the presence of so many people who wish to receive Communion that the Mass or the distribution of Communion outside Mass be protracted too long. Other reasons include the

taking of Communion to the sick or the aged in their homes or in the hospitals.⁴¹

The introduction of Extra-ordinary ministers in some particular Churches has tremendously helped in the distribution of Communion both within and outside of Mass. More sick and aged persons are presently refreshed with the Eucharist in their homes and in the hospitals. While several particular Churches have not yet implemented this provision of canon law, it is however, satisfying to note that an increasing number of bishops see the good in this ministry and are according the practice due recognition and acceptance. The laity should be educated to accept the development as a step in the right direction.

4.3. Parish Social Welfare Schemes:

Parishes have equally started to develop social schemes for the welfare of their members. Sometimes people accuse the Church of being too “anonymous” and not in touch with the actual living situations of her members particularly those experiencing hardships. The pastor and his assisting clerics alone cannot single-handedly resolve the social problems of all parishioners. Some parishes now establish Social Welfare Schemes with the aim of mobilizing parishioners to be their “brothers' keepers”. This is one way of reducing the anonymity that has been prevalent in the Church.⁴²

The social needs of Catholics have to be addressed. It is a known fact that some of the faithful have left the fold in search of such social communion. Many try to satisfy this human need by fostering and joining tribal unions, clubs, or associations of various types. Some of these do damage to the spiritual heritage of the faithful. On Sundays several members of the faithful go

for cultural social meetings of various types, where several of their economic and social needs are catered for. Social benefits are used as baits to attract persons, who would otherwise not have joined such groups.

The Church therefore, calls on her numerous institutions and communities to be involved in ameliorating the degenerating conditions that people live in by fostering bonds of solidarity that would improve their livelihood. Writing on the Church in Africa, Pope John Paul II says: “The entire ministry of Jesus is marked by the concern he showed to all those around him who were affected by suffering: persons in mourning, paralytics, lepers, the blind, the deaf, the mute (cf. Mt 8:17)”.⁴³ Also, “It is impossible to accept that in evangelisation one could or should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development and peace in the world.”⁴⁴ On the same token, Pope Paul VI had insisted that the liberation that evangelisation proclaims “cannot be contained in the simple and restricted dimension of economics, politics, social or cultural life; it must envisage the whole man, in all his aspects, right up to and including his openness, to the absolute, even the Divine Absolute”.⁴⁵

The parish social welfare schemes are precisely to meet such needs and rekindle those social aspects of the Church, which Christ taught his followers and which the Apostles and the early Christians tried hard to live out in their existential situations. The members are involved when parishioners are sick, bereaved or deceased. They raise funds and mobilize parishioners to be involved. It is becoming common feature to find announcements about members who are sick, bereaved or deceased. This development is helping to revive the enthusiasm reminiscent of

the early church. It is interesting sometimes to hear comments expressing surprises: “Is this possible in the Catholic Church?” By such social actions and interactions, the parish gradually becomes the centre where the faithful meet their spiritual, educational and social needs. The parish thus brings social fulfilment to the members who are able to interact more actively. So many 'fallen' Catholics are finding their way back to the Church through these social welfare initiatives.

5. Conclusion

These unfolding scenarios and dimensions of the dynamism of the parish institution in the Church have multifarious implications for the ministry of the clergy and the apostolate activities of the lay faithful. They help to unfold the hidden dynamic elements in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council as well as afford the laity the opportunity to exercise their obligations and rights in the Church, thus, making the parish the authentic centre for collaborative ministry between the clerics, the consecrated persons and the laity. While bringing out the dimensions of the Church's mission that were neglected for awhile, they also give indication that the means for the parish to accomplish the work of Christ on earth are quite elastic. These scenarios challenge both the local Ordinaries and parochial pastors to brace up for the unfolding and future challenges so that the progressive ecclesiological vision of the Council about the dynamism of the parish would gradually become a reality that would move the whole Church into a new age in the implementation of the mission of Christ on earth.

ENDNOTES

¹Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 1.

²Agbonlahon, E. Orobator, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context*, (Limuru (Kenya), 2000), 184p.

³Codex Iuris Canonici (CIC), 1983, c. 515, §1

⁴John P. Beal, James A. Coriden and Thomas J. Green, *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York, Paulist press, 2000), 676.

⁵CIC 1983, c. 518. This canon however, recognizes that personal parishes can also be established, which could be determined by reason of the rite, language or nationality of the faithful of a certain territory, or on some other basis.

⁶John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 100

⁷Ibid.

⁸CIC 1983, cc. 528-529: These canons specifically point out the obligations of parish priests to members' of Christ's faithful in their parishes: to children, youths, adults, married couples, the sick, the poor, the lonely, those suffering, the exiled. See also canon 776.

⁹CIC 1983, c. 768.

¹⁰CIC 1983, c. 528.

¹¹CIC 1983, c. 776.

¹²The hallmark of this programme, which is prescribed to span a period of two to three years, as may be determined by the Conference of Catholic Bishops, is the conscientious Christian formation given to catechumens.

¹³CIC 1983, c. 515.

¹⁴CIC 1983, cc. 528-530: The ramifications of these are spread throughout the code of canon law. See for instance, CIC 1983, c. 968, §1; CIC 1983, c. 1079, §2; CIC 1983, c. 1080, §1; CIC 1983, c. 1196, 1^o; CIC 1983, c. 1197; CIC 1983, c. 1203; CIC 1983, c. 1245; John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, & Thomas J. Green (editors), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York, Paulist press, 2000), 699-702.

¹⁵CIC 1983, c. 1752.

¹⁶CIC 1983, c. 216.

¹⁷CIC 1983, c. 208.

¹⁸CIC 1983, c. 210.

¹⁹CIC 1983, c. 532. This canon acknowledges the pastor as the caretaker of

the parish as a juridical entity, who also has the responsibility of ensuring that the goods of the parish are administered according to the provisions of canons 1281-1288.

²⁰ Luke Emehiele Ijezie, “Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-2:4 as a Model of Political Governance”, in Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu, (Ed.-in-Chief), *Theology, Faith and Environment,- African Journal of Contextual Theology* [Enugu, SIST publications], 2(2010), 36-37.

²¹ CIC 1983, c. 515

²² CIC 1983, c. 519.

²³ CIC 1983, cc. 545-552.

²⁴ CIC 1983, cc. 519, 771, 776 & 777,

²⁵ CIC 1983, cc. 528-529.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, Decree, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 10.

²⁷ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 37.

²⁸ CIC 1983, c. 529, §.2

²⁹ CIC 1983, c. 536

³⁰ CIC 1983, cc. 528 & 529

³¹ J. A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green and D. E. Heintschel (editors) *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, commissioned by the Canon Society of America, (London, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 2000), 432.

³² Dalton, W., “Parish Councils or Parish Pastoral Councils?”, in *Studia Canonica*, a Canadian Canon Law Review, 22(1988)1, 170.

³³ The tendency of the parish priest to unilaterally decide after silently listening to the members of the council is against the spirit of the consultative process. It is equally antithetical for the laity to have the impression that their consultative vote is synonymous with definitive decision on issues.

³⁴ CIC 1983, c. 537.

³⁵ Griffin, B., “The Parish and Lay Ministry”, in *Chicago Studies*, 23(1984), p. 59.

³⁶ Latin American Bishops, *Evangelisation at present and in the future of Latin America: Conclusion*; Washington, NCCB, 1979, p. 641; cf. also Coriden, A James, “Options for the Organisation of Ministry”, in *Official Ministry in a New Age*, James H. Provost (ed.), published by Canon Law Society of America, Washington DC, 1981, p. 230.

³⁷ See Bishops of East Africa, “AMECEA Plenary Study Conference on Building Small Christian Communities”, in *AFER*, 21(1979)5, p. 303; for

more on the Basic Christian Communities see Tomas G. Bissonnette, “Comunidades Eclesiales De Base: Some Contemporary Attempts to Build Ecclesial Koinonia”, in *The Church as Communion, permanent Seminar Studies*, No 1, edited by James H. Provost, 1976, pp. 24-58.

³⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 51; Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 89..

³⁹ Cullen, M., “How we will Initiate the New Era of Evangelisation”, in *New Era of Evangelisation Seminar Proceedings*, sponsored by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, Ibadan, May 13, 1984, p. 56. Cullen is a priest of the Order of St. Augustine. Malachy Cullen, had suggested in 1984 that the New Era of Evangelisation in Nigeria must embrace the BCC as a *conditio sine qua non*. He wrote: “I must be truthful and say what I think, that palliatives are not enough for Nigeria. We must go the whole way and found the Small Christian Communities in every corner of the land”.

⁴⁰ CIC 1983, cc. 230, §3 & 910, §2. While canon 230 gives the general principles canon 910 is more specific on “extraordinary minister of holy communion”.

⁴¹ The Sacred Congregation for the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Immensae Caritatis*, 1973.

⁴² Walter Ihejirika,

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*., n. 68

⁴⁴ Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa, *Lineamenta*, p.79.

⁴⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Dec. 8, 1975, nn.31 and 33; See also George Ehusani, O., *A Prophetic Church*, (Ede (Osun State), publ. Provincial Pastoral Institute, 1996), 26-27.