

Revitalizing Lay Theological Education in Africa: Development, Challenges and Hopes

Michael Ufok Udoekpo*

ABSTRACT

The legacy of the Second Vatican Council, of which the Churches in Africa and in the United States form a part, is a story of accomplishment, communion, co-responsibility and synodality. It affirms the need for proper education, formation and preparation for those who exercise a ministry, including the lay faithful, who have the right and duty to acquire knowledge of Christian teaching and theology. This paper discusses the development, challenges and hopes for lay theological education in the Church in Africa as a family, with a particular focus on Nigeria as a case study. It revitalizes the need to develop and strengthen existing lay theological structures to ensure adequate and qualified personnel for the mission of the Church in Africa and beyond. Theological appeals and proposals are finally and newly presented for possible areas of mutual collaboration and solidarity between the Church in Africa and the Church in America.

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Department of Theology, Veritas University, Nigeria.

*Corresponding Author:
e-mail: ufokism@yahoo.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

This work is a development of an original paper presented at the 2023 Conference on Church Life Africa (CLA), organized and funded by the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, the United States. It was held at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Resource Center, Abuja. Its aim was to highlight the need for lay theological formation and the areas of possible collaboration and solidarity between the Church in Africa and the Church in America or beyond (Udoekpo, 2023c, pp. 4–12). In his 1995 Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, Pope John Paul II insists that “the Laity is to be helped to become increasingly aware of their role in the Church, thereby fulfilling their particular mission as baptized and confirmed persons . . . Lay people are to be trained for their mission through suitable centers and schools of biblical and pastoral formation” (Paul II, 1995, no. 90). Similar message of the urgency to train lay Christian Leaders in the light of faith, in all sectors of life was heard in his 1999 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Church in America, where he stressed that education of all Christian leaders in Catholic centers and schools can play an outstanding role in promoting the inculturation of the Gospel (Paul II, 1999, no. 71).

In a wider context of the global Church, and in light of Vatican II’s ecclesiology and of the postconciliar magisterial documents, this paper focuses on the development, challenges and hopes of lay theological education in Africa, with particular emphasis on the Church in Nigeria. It identifies the identity and the theology of the laity, as well as their mission in the Church in Africa, as a family of God’s people (Udoekpo, 2017, pp. 123–125; Udoekpo, 2023f, pp. 5–9). The paper further argues for developing and strengthening lay theological education in accordance with Vatican II’s theology of the Laity. This is fundamental in ensuring qualified personnel for the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa (Paul VI, 1975, no. 14) that sees itself best as a family. Finally, the work theologically appeals to and presents a few proposals and suggestions for possible areas of mutual collaboration in communion and shared solidarity between the Church in Africa and the Church in the United States of America or beyond.



2. IDENTITY AND THEOLOGY OF THE LAITY IN AFRICA (NIGERIA)

2.1. Biblical Basis

The identity of the Lay faithful that deserves proper theological education not only in the Church and Africa but elsewhere is rooted in scripture. This is evident in the storyline of salvation history. This history, as we know, is largely an account of the relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament and between God and the Church in the New Testament (Scobie, 2003, pp. 469–500). In the OT, Israel is referred to as “my people.” That is, *‘am* in the Masoretic Text (MT) and *laos* in the Septuagint (LXX). In this story, as extensively treated by Scobie (2003, pp. 469–508) and by Udoekpo (2023b, pp. 6–11; 2023d, pp. 1–7), God’s people are called or chosen by God from among the nations (*gôyîm*; LXX *ethnē*).

Notably, the actual phrase “people of God” that would reoccur later in Vatican II’s ecclesiology to identify the laity, or the “lay faithful” in the 1964 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), occurs only eleven times. Of course, *Lumen Gentium*, as a whole, explains the Church’s nature as a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among men and women. The Church is not only the people of God, but, has its mission as the universal sacrament of salvation God (*Lumen Gentium*, Book II). Apart from eleven occurrences of the phrase “people of God”, phrases such as “my people,” “your people,” and “his people” occur about three hundred times in the OT (Scobie, 2003, p. 469).

In the NT, specifically with the birth of Christ, God comes to his people, Israel, in a new way and fulfils the promises made to Abraham and his descendants (Lk. 1:54–55). In 2 Corinthian 6:16, for example, Paul quotes the OT covenant formula, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people (*laos*)”, and applies it to the Church. In Romans 9:25–26, the same Paul sees Hosea’s prophecy of the restoration of “my people” (Hos 2:23) as fulfilled in the Church. In I Peter 2:10, the Christian community is directly advised, “Once you were no people but now you are God’s people, once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy” (*hoi pote ou laos nun de laos theou, hoi ouk ēlēthēnoi nun de eleēthentes*).

In speaking about this Church of the NT, as the “the people of God,” Okure (2016, pp. 93–105), wrote “God reconciled to the divine self “things in heaven and things on earth, making peace,” bestowing wholeness by Christ’s blood on the cross (Colossians 1:20; cf. John 11:52; 12:32) ... God also entrusted to Christ’s followers “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18–19). The Church as the continuation of the people of God and as the new Israel, of which the Nigerian Church forms a part, however, is central in the NT. In it, Christ not only “fulfils God’s purpose in the historical order by incorporating believers into the new Israel, but fulfils God’s purposes as well in the created order by opening Israel to all humankind and by incorporating believers into the new humanity” (Arinze, 2013, pp. 18–22; Scobie, 2003, p. 487).

2.2. Identity of the Laity in the Church in Africa

Based on the Scriptures, the Second Vatican Council, in her *Lumen Gentium* reserves the term “lay faithful” for all members of Christ faithful “except those in holy Orders and those who belong to the religious states approved by the church” (Second Vatican II Council, 1964, no. 31). Lay faithful, both within Nigeria and outside Africa, are those called to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God” (1964, no. 31). Like the clergy and religious, they too are by baptism made sharers in Christ’s priestly, prophetic and kingly office, but sent to be ‘salt and light’ charged to act as leaven for earthly progress (Matt 5:13–14). Lay faithful both within and outside the Church in Africa are non-ordained members of the religious institutes sanctioned by the Church (Second Vatican II Council, 1964, no. 31). By baptism and confirmation, a lay person is united with Christ the head, incorporated into his Mystical Body, and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15–16). From baptism, therefore, members of the laity received the very life and love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As exalted members of Christ’s chosen race and royal priesthood, they participate in the common priesthood of all believers (Udoekpo, 2023d, pp. 1–7).

In Nigeria, as rightly noted by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, p. 80), they include members of the statutory bodies such as the Catholic Laity Council (CLCN), Catholic Men Organization (CMO), the Catholic Women Organization (CWO), and the Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (CYON). Under CYON are other youth organizations such as Mary League Girls, Catholic Boys and Catholic Girls, Young Christian Students (YCS), Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), Young Christian Workers, Catholic Cadets and many more (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, p. 82). Some other lay groups in the Church in Africa also include those solidarities and pious societies that emphasize devotion to Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the saints. Among them are the Guild of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Divine

Mercy Society, St. Anthony and Jude, St. Theresa, St. Vincent de Paul, the Legion of Mary and the Purgatorian, Catholic Christian Mothers, and the Most Holy Rosary, the Block Rosary and many more (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2009, p. 84).

Other lay groups that concentrate on the practice of corporal and spiritual works of mercy are the Madonna Mercy and the Catholic Workers Volunteers Force. Those that emphasize conversion and discipleship include the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Neo-Catechumenal Way, the Schools of Evangelization (e.g., Emmaus and Disciples' Schools in Isieluku and Ikot Ekpene Dioceses, etc.), the Renew, the Focalare, the Communion and the Liberation as well as various Bible Societies (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2009, p. 84). Others are the Catechists Association, Marriage Encounter or Counselling Association, the Nurses Guild, the Catholic Teachers' Association, the Catholic, the Catholic Doctors' Association, the Catholic Lawyers' Association and the Catholic Media Practitioners. We also have the Scout, Man O War, the Red Cross, the Catholic Workers Volunteer Force, and the Knights and their Ladies (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2009, p. 84).

Similarly, in the United States, the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), in their cultural context, identify these laymen and women of every race and culture who serve in various capacities in parishes, schools, diocesan agencies, and Church institutions with many position titles. The US Bishops describe them with a generic term as “*lay ecclesial ministers*” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, p. 5). They do so for theological reasons and because of what they have in common, as taught in theology or the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, namely “that all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, and this holiness is conducive to more human way of living even in society here on earth” (Second Vatican II Council, 1964, no. 40).

2.3. *Theology of the Laity and Their Mission in the Church*

In fact, it was the Vatican II Council that signaled “the most tremendous shift in the theology of the laity” (Ezenezi, 2015, p. 243). The Council’s theology emphasized the baptismal dignity of the lay faithful through which the laity has received their full membership and responsibilities in the Church. These aspects of ecclesiology of the laity were recognized through her imaging of the Church as a people of God, a mystical body of Christ, but also the Church as a Communion (Second Vatican II Council, 1964, nos. 1, 6, 7, 8–9, 13, 48).

Credits must be given to Yves Congar, OP (1904–1995), Karl Rahner, SJ (1904–1984) and Edward Schillebeeckx, OP (1914–2009). These men were instrumental in establishing the fundamental and foundational principles upon which the Vatican II’s theology of the laity was based (see, summaries of their thoughts and contributions in Ezenezi, 2015, pp. 27–39; Congar, 1985, p. xi; Congar, 1972, pp. 178–179; Rahner, 1975, pp. 34–42; Schillebeeckx, 1973, p. 108, Rahner, 1961, pp. 319).

They moved away from the strictly juridical and hierarchical approach that dominated pre-Vatican II ecclesiology. Congar, in his “total ecclesiology,” argues that as members “of the people of God, laypersons are, like clerics and monks, by their state and directly ordered to heavenly things” (Congar, 1985, pp. xv–xvi, 17–18). Their participation in the threefold function of the Church (priestly, kingly and prophetic) is grounded in their baptismal identity. Various ministries in the Church, including those of the Laity, he argues, serve as communion and service to the entire structure of the Church (Congar, 1985, pp. 118, 176–233, 234–265, 271–311). Like Congar, Rahner argues that the laity should not be defined in terms of the profane and the sacred. Rather, their special role in the world is still within the “one consecrated realm of the Church” (Rahner, 1961, p. 319). For Rahner, lay persons should be formed in such a way that they may be Christians in the place where they are or should be in the world, for it is there they are called to bear witness to Christ by their lives (Rahner, 1964, p. 352). Similarly, Schillebeeckx, among other things, speaks of “religious wealth” as the primary mission of the Church shared by the clergy, religious and the laity (Schillebeeckx, 1963, p. 97).

The theological insight of these men found ultimate expressions, especially in three of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council, namely, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964), *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People of November 18, 1965) and in *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965). In *Lumen Gentium*, the Church teaches us the nature of the Church not only as an instrument of communion with God and unity among men, but it clarifies the Church’s mission as the universal sacrament of salvation (Hardon, 1998, p. 18).

As we saw earlier, it is in *Lumen Gentium* 31 that we derived a working definition of the lay faithful for this paper. Even though the lay faithful are competent in living the faith in the world and dealing with “secular” matters (Second Vatican II Council, 1964, nos. 30, 31, 33; Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 43; Second Vatican II Council, 1964, nos. 2–5, 7 11–14), the Councils teaches us that, “the forms and task of life are many, but there is one holiness, which is cultivated by all who are led by God’s Spirit . . . All, however, according to their own gifts and duties, must steadfastly advance along the way

of a living faith, which arouses hope and works through love” (Second Vatican II Council, 1964, no. 41).

In *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, emphasis, according to Hardon (1998, p. 20), continues to be placed on the practical expression of the Church’s mission, to which the laity are specially called in virtue of their Baptism and incorporation into Christ. It recognizes that the laity has the right to establish and direct their own associations on the condition that they preserve the necessary link with ecclesiastical authority (Hardon, 1998, p. 20).

In the words of the Council, “The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring people the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of temporal things. The laity, carrying out this mission of the Church, exercises their apostolate therefore in the world as well as in the Church, in temporal order as well as in the spiritual” (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, nos. 5–7). Their various places of apostolate touch on family, schools, church communities, young people, adult men and women, national, international, individuals, and groups (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, nos. 9–22). In other words, and as noted by Ezenezi (2015, p. 420) and in Obiorah (2020, pp. 4–9), there is no dichotomy between the laity’s mission in the Church and the laity’s mission in the world, as if the former were primarily “spiritual” and the latter restricted to the “worldly” realm. Since the mission of the Church is both spiritual and temporal, the lay people are called to build the ecclesial communion (*ad intra*) as well as evangelize the world with gospel values (*ad extra*).

2.4. Post-Conciliar Documents and Magisterial Teachings

The mission and theological invitation of the laity continue to be expressed in post-conciliar documents, magisterial teachings, theses, and theological literature, particularly those focusing on Africa. In the 1972 Apostolic Letter, *Ministeria Quaedam*, Paul VI sought to extend the involvement of the laity in the mission of the Church as a fruitful sign of the spirit. He abolished the sub-diaconate in the Latin Church and reduced the four “minor orders” to two (acolyte and lector), giving them the name “ministries.” In his message of August 15, 2022, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Paul VI’s *Ministeria Quaedam*, Pope Francis acknowledges the importance of this 1972 document as that which offers the Church a meaningful reflection that led to renewal as well as informed his two recent Apostolic Letters, Issued *Motu Proprio*. Francis’ *Motu Proprio* addressed the question of instituted ministries (Francis, 2016a). First was *Spiritus Domini*, of January 10 2021, which modified Canon 230 paragraph 1 on admittance of women to the instituted ministries of reader and acolyte. Second, *Antiquum Ministerium* of May 10 2021, instituting the ministry of catechism (Francis, 2022, nos. 1–11).

Another remarkable development in the theology and mission of the laity in the Church, following *Ministeria Quaedam* and Vatican Council II, was the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI, on December 8, 1975. In this work, Paul VI focuses not solely on the laity but on evangelizations, since the Church, of which the lay faithful form an integral part, exists in order to evangelize, preach and teach (Paul VI, 1975, no. 14). This mission of the Church has its foundation in Christ, the first evangelizer and the one who has called the Church to continue his mission. As such, “the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs” (Paul VI, 1975, no. 18). Of particular importance today is the role or mission of the laity in the evangelization of the world, around us which encompasses the realms of politics, economics, religion, the media and all the sciences. Essential to this task is the role and mission of the family, the domestic Church, and the model of the Church in Africa, which must be “a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates” (Paul II, 1987, nos. 15–20; Paul VI, 1975, no. 71; Udoekpo, 1997, pp. 10–24).

Additionally, the 1983 new code of canon law addresses different places and, in a deeper way, the role of the laity in the mission of the Church (The Canon Law Society, 1983, cc. 207, 208, 209, 211). It touches on the rights of all Christians (The Canon Law Society, 1983, cc. 204–223), as well as speaks to the specific rights and duties of the lay faithful (The Canon Law Society, 1983, cc. 224–231). In the 1988 *Christifideles Laici*, on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church, John Paul II reaffirms the special role and mission of the laity in the Church, which is rooted in their sacraments of baptism and confirmation (Paul II, 1988, nos. 2–3, 14). Through the laypeople, “the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and love” (Paul II, 1988, no. 7).

3. MISSION OF THE LAITY IN THE CHURCH-FAMILY IN AFRICA AND NIGERIA

The mission of the lay faithful in Africa or Nigeria is reflected in the teachings of the above-discussed documents, including those of Vatican II. This is intensified and deeply expressed in a contextual manner in the 1995 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*. In this

document, the family model of the Church, of which Africa as a whole, her mission of both laity and clergy and roles are closely and commonly identified, is amplified and defined to match African values and cultures (Paul II, 1995, no. 84).

In this document, the lay persons of all groups are among the agents of evangelization who are to be helped to “increasingly become aware of their roles in the Church, thereby fulfilling their particular mission as baptized and confirmed persons” (Paul II, 1995, nos. 85, 90). Additionally, in the Lineamenta of the First National Pastoral Congress, Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission, similar messages were heard. This document also defined the lay faithful’s mission to evangelize and sanctify the temporal order as shearers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 1999, nos. 78–82; Udoekpo, 2020, pp. 1–24).

Similarly, in the *Africae Munus*, a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Benedict XVI reinforced the ecclesial dynamism and outlined a program for pastoral activity and evangelization in Africa. He emphasized the need for reconciliation, justice and peace (Benedict XVI, 2011, nos. 1–128). Drawing on previous Church documents, *Africae Munus* sees the mission of the members of the Church, including the Laity, as those of missionary agents of reconciliation, justice and peace (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 128). It lays emphasis on the priority of the secular apostolate of the laity and calls for the appropriate formation of the laity in all aspects of the Church’s mission (Benedict XVI, 2011, nos. 128–131).

Furthermore, the *Manual of the Laity* of the CBCN draws from the relevant Church documents and discusses evangelization of different forms as the primary duty of the lay people who are baptized and confirmed (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, nos. 51–54). In this essential document, for the Nigerian Church, the CBCN agrees with the *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II that the laity is invited to take part in three forms or situations of the Church’s evangelization, namely, (1) mission *ad gentes* to “peoples or groups who do or yet believe in Christ, or who are far from Christ, or whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 56, cf. Paul II, 1990, no. 34; Second Vatican Council, 1965c, nos. 1–5). (2) Mission *ad intra* “directed to the pastoral care of the faithful with the objective to renew, sustain and promote catholic faith and life” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 34). (3) Mission *ad extra* directed to those who have “lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (Paul II, 1990, no. 33). The success of these missions, depends as well, on the formation of the laity in the Church in Africa (Dodo, 1994, pp. 7–9; Udoekpo, 2023a, pp. xix–xxvi).

4. LAY INTEGRAL AND THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

4.1. Lay Integral Formation

The Church, especially in Africa, has always had the need for sufficient and adequate formation for those who exercise a ministry (The Canon Law Society, 1983, cc. 235 par. 1, 236, 597 par. 2). The CBCN, citing, relevant Codes of the canon law, notes that “lay people have the duty and right to acquire the knowledge of Christian teaching which is appropriate to each one’s capacity and condition, so that they may be able to live according to this teaching, to proclaim it and if necessary defend it, and may be capable of playing their part in the exercise of the apostolate” (The Canon Law Society, 1983, c. 229; Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 107). Similarly, the USCCB, in their *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, notes that “lay persons who devote themselves permanently or temporarily to some special services of the Church are obliged to acquire the appropriate formation which is required to fulfill their function properly” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2015, p. 33). In other words, be it in the United States or in Africa, the laity, who devote themselves for special ministries in the Church, including, the “lay ecclesial ministers” in the United States of America, and Catechists in the Church in Africa, all need and deserve formation of high standard.

The Church everywhere, especially in Africa, has always acknowledged “the irreducible role of the catechists in evangelization” (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 1999, no. 61). The Catechist in the Church in Africa is regarded as “a determinative force” (Paul II, 1995, no. 91). The more, reason, and like other lay faithful ministers, the Catechist should receive adequate doctrinal, moral and spiritual training (Paul II, 1995, no. 91; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005, no. 61). This is perfectly in line with the teaching we find in *Christifideles Laici* (Christ’s Faithful People) and the *Redemptoris Missio* (Mission of the Redeemer), that “The Laity are to be helped to become increasingly aware of their role in the Church, thereby fulfilling their particular mission as baptized and confirmed persons... Lay people are to be trained for their mission through suitable centers and schools of biblical and pastoral formation” (Paul II, 1995, no. 90; Paul II, 1998, nos. 1–15; Paul II, 1990, nos. 10–17).

Similarly, *Ecclesia in America* calls for the formation of the lay people and states that the education of all Christian leaders in Catholic centers and schools can play an outstanding role in promoting the

inculturation of the Gospel (Paul II, 1999, no. 71). Effectiveness of such formation must address the whole person, in terms of their emotion, imagination, will, heart and mind. Their argument, which I do agree with, is that since it is the whole person who ministers, the whole lay person must be the subject of formation (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, p. 33).

As spelt out in the *Pastoral Dabo Vobis*, the lay formation must cover the four areas of formation: “Human, Spiritual, doctrinal or intellectual (theological) and pastoral” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, nos. 263–268; United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, pp. 34–44; cf., Paul II, 1992, nos. 1–30). In fact, “Lay human formation seeks to develop the laypersons or minister’s human qualities and character” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, nos. 263–268). The goal is to foster “a well-balanced personality involving self-awareness, freedom, human sexuality and affectivity, integrity, respect, generosity, justice and peace” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 265; United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, pp. 36–37). Lay spiritual formation enables lay people to “structure and get committed to the religious dimension of their being and let this consciousness influence their daily lives” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 266). It does not end here. It aims at arousing and animating “true hunger for holiness, desire for union with the Father through Christ in the Spirit, daily growing in love of God and neighbor . . . It promotes and strengthens that fundamental conversion that places God, not oneself, at the center of one’s life” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, p. 38.). Lay pastoral formation “focuses on the concrete application of Christian principles to life” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, p. 47). It “cultivates the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that directly pertain to effective functioning in the ministry setting and that also pertain to pastoral administration that supports direct ministry” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, p. 47). Granted that lay formation takes on a special character, as discussed above, the Second Vatican Council stresses that it has to be integral so as to include, particularly, the doctrinal or intellectual dimensions with special attention to the theological formation (Second Vatican Council, 1965a, no. 29).

4.2. Lay Intellectual/Theological Formation

The lay theological formation is practiced within the realm of doctrinal or intellectual formation. This nature of lay formation undertakes to develop their understanding and promote “in-depth assimilation of the Catholic faith, that is rooted in God’s revelation and embodies in the living tradition of the Church” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, p. 42). This “consists mainly of the study of the sacred sciences that draws upon a wide range of other disciplines: philosophy, literature and the arts, psychology, sociology, medical ethics, culture and language studies, business administration, leadership and organizational development, law and so on” (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2015, pp. 42–43; cf., Udoekpo, 2022, pp. 1–44). The Catholic Bishops of Nigeria (CBCN), in line with the Vatican II and other Magisterial documents, teaches that intellectual or doctrinal formation be given to the lay people, especially the catechists and other ministers in catholic institutions, schools, offices, factories, universities and hospitals. This is “to enable them to deepen their understanding of faith, and defend them from conflicting trends, as well as share them with others” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 267). Such formation may come in the form of catechesis, bible study, regular retreats, seminars and conferences. In addition, the fundamentals of catholic belief, morals, liturgy, church history, ecumenism, interfaith and religious dialogue should be part and parcel of this formation (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 2009, no. 267). Above all, lay theological formation is a journey beyond catechesis to the actual study of theology in a systematic way (United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, 2005, pp. 5; 43).

This systematic process may be complex for the laity, partly because it deals with abstract concepts such as faith, justification, redemption, grace, salvation, revelation, eschatology, spirit, and so on. But it is worth pursuing by our lay faithful. As they pursue it, they will discover that systematic theology contains echoes of many different voices of religions, schools, systems, and concerns. In fact, underneath these voices, theology—or at least Catholic Christian theology—is concerned with our experience of God, particularly our experience of God as a community of faith of which the laity in the Church in Africa and beyond forms a part (Rausch, 1993, p. 12). According to Hebert (Ryan, 1993, p. 69), theology, which our lay people need today, “is an attempt to understand and interpret the faith experience of a community, to bring it to expression in language and symbol. St. Anselm (d. 1109) explains it as *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”).

Still, for the interest of our lay community, in Africa and beyond, the task of Christian theology includes providing a clear and comprehensive description of the Christian faith as well as translating that faith into terms that are intelligible to the wider culture (Migliore, 1991, p. 1). It is a reflection on the praxis of the Christian faith (Jennings, 1995; Migliore, 1991, p. 1). Theology is “faith raising questions” (Migliore, 1991, pp. 2–5). Christian faith, in Schillebeeckx’s view, “causes us to think” (Schillebeeckx, 1981, pp. v–ix). It is a thinking faith (Hall, 1989, pp. 5–18).

The lay faithful must be conscious of the fact that underlying these understandings is the assumption that faith and inquiry, needed by all, are inseparable. They are essential for our lay people, especially the young ones who have the potential to be formed for catholic schools, universities, seminaries and other institutions as teachers, lecturers, professors and administrators.

It might also interest our lay community that theology is slightly different from the fields of religious studies or the history of religions (Mbiti, 1991, 1–200; Smart, 1995, pp. 4–88; Niditch, 1997, pp. 6–90; Hess, 2007, pp. 3–105; Hexham, 2011, pp. 8–78; Wiles, 1976, pp. 10–13). It is important for the laity to know that Religious Studies seek to study a religious tradition of faith from the outside, as a detached and objective observer, while theology seeks to give expression to one's faith from within a particular religious tradition, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on (Rausch, 1993, p. 12).

Let me also add that Karl Rahner, who influenced Vatican II's theology of the laity, viewed theology as the scientific and systematic reflection of the church upon its faith (Rahner, 1975, p. 1687). It is “the conscious and methodological explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith” (Rahner, 1975, p. 1687). It is the science of faith and work of the church of which the lay faithful form a part (A beautiful summary of theology as the “work of the Church” is listed in Rausch, 1993, pp. 17–22 as well as “methods of asking theological questions” in Migliore, 1991, pp. 14–18).

The object of theology, the lay faithful must continue to appreciate, is divine revelation, which is God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ (Mansini, 2018, pp. 250–66). Here, theology is discussed as a science, including Aristotelian science. Theology is not completely a subjective enterprise since the faith experience is always shared in the community of lay, clergy and religious), and transmitted historically through Scripture, biblical theology, and the Christian tradition (Rausch, 1993, p. 12; Ryan, 1993, pp. 8–11). Its branches include those that investigate biblical, historical, systematic, and doctrinal sources of Christian living. Some of these branches are constructive. They articulate a Christian understanding of God, Christ, the church, the sacraments, and so on. Others are moral theology, pastoral or practical theology; others ally with other disciplines, such as spirituality, liturgical theology, and canon law (Rausch, 1993, p. 13; Migliore, 1991, p. 9).

The lay faithful in the Church in Africa and beyond, especially those who teach, or are prepared to teach and conduct retreats and seminars in catholic schools, universities and other institutions, houses of formation, or parishes and diocesan centers, need more than thorough adult faith formation in the growing Church in Africa. Lay faithful deserve well-rounded theological formation that transcends basic or elementary catechesis. Those who embark on formation in various schools of theology, universities, Institutes and catechetical centers in our local church in Africa, Nigeria in particular, should recognize the need to improve the theological education of our lay faithful. Also, we need those who sponsor students for academic degrees, certificates, or diploma programmes in our schools and institutions. They are equally invited to appreciate the urgent need for further development and strengthening of the existing theological knowledge and formation structures in the Church in Africa and beyond.

4.3. Current Lay-Theological Development in Africa/Nigeria

Credit must be given to African Bishops, especially the CBCN, for their effort thus far in responding to Vatican II's theology of the Laity and their integral formation. Such efforts are evident in the establishment and promotion of Theological Faculties and schools, including the Catholic University of East Africa, the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt and Veritas University, Abuja. Bishops in Africa, the CBCN in particular, have also, to their credit, implemented and embraced the contents of major documents pertaining to lay theological formation in the Church in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Some of these documents include *Ecclesia in Africa*, *Africae Manus*, the *Manual of the Laity*, and *Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission* (Catholic Secreteriat of Nigeria, 1999) as well as the 2018 Report of the CBCN to the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life on “Best Practices” (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2018). In these documents, the bishops consistently stress the need for the training and formation of the laity in the Church in Africa for their evangelizing mission. Worthy of note is also the 2018 report to the Dicastery, where the Nigerian Bishops particularly affirmed their establishment of the Episcopal Committee for the Laity as well as the Manual of the Laity to serve as a guideline and *vade mecum* for all the lay ministers, individuals, groups and associations.

In addition, some ecclesiastical provinces, dioceses and parishes have established schools of Theology and schools of evangelization as well as leadership training for the lay faithful, including Catechists, where informal courses are offered (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2018). Courses developed and offered in these centers, especially at the Catholic Institute of West and Veritas University Abuja, for instance, include a systematic and practical introduction to Scripture and Tradition, Christology, Catechesis, Ecclesiology, Liturgy, Sacraments, Ethics, Social Teachings of the Church. The aim of this

Theological formation or development, if I may reiterate, is to help the laity deepen their knowledge of the faith and develop their pastoral abilities. With such development, they may be able to receive and answer with confidence the call of the Second Vatican Council and post-conciliar magisterial teachings on evangelization and spreading of the Gospel in word and deed by acting as leaven in the church's Communities and in the socio-economic, political and religious complexities of our society today (Udoekpo, 1994, pp. 27–35). These efforts, thus far, in lay theological formation and development in the Church in Nigeria are not without challenges.

5. CHALLENGES AND HOPES

Many of the lay faithful in the Church in Africa desire and recognize the need for and benefits of theological education. They also know how this may affect their contribution to the mission of the Church or relate to their overall reception of Vatican II's theology of the laity. Their recognition and desires are often hindered in so many ways. Some of these challenges already acknowledged by CBCN, the lay faithful, or many African theologians include family challenges and their temporal affairs, clericalism, inadequate funding to finance formal theological training, objections faced by theology in Nigerian culture/not marketable and paternalism. Others are priestly lifestyles in Africa/Nigeria, relationship with Church hierarchy, responses of the Church to lay socio-political, economic and cultural responsibilities of the Laity and ineffective implementation of the principles of co-responsibilities and ecclesial communion (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2018, pp. 1 Veritas20; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2009, pp. 99–106; Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 1999, pp. 43–55; Udoekpo, 2018, pp. 154–159).

In spite of these challenges facing the lay faithful and the Church in Africa and Nigeria, African Bishops, particularly the CBCN, like their counterparts in the United States, have not relented nor lost hope in collaborating with others, promoting the Vatican II theology and ecclesiology of the Laity. Again, this is evidenced not only in establishing some of the above schools and centers of theology and catechetical formation but not too long ago. The CBCN appealed and obtained from Rome two ecclesiastical faculties of Philosophy and Theology for the Nigerian Church. These faculties have been currently offering First Cycle courses for Baccalaureate (STB) degrees in Sacred Theology and Philosophy. They are available for the clergy, religious and the laity in Africa and beyond at Veritas University, Abuja.

6. AREAS FOR COLLABORATION AND SOLIDARITY

As we reflect on hopes for better things to come, it is worth acknowledging that the Church in Africa and the Church in the United States have demonstrated a positive reception of Vatican II's theology of the Laity, as well as its ecclesiology of communion, collaboration and co-responsibility among members of the Church, including, bishops, priests, deacons, religious and the lay faithful. Both Churches have also shown commitment to advancing lay theological formation in words and deeds by encouraging and establishing theological faculties, centers, institutes and in their essential publications that have greatly informed this paper. I am referring to parallel works generated within the contexts of the Church in Africa and the Church in the United States, such as *Ecclesia in Africa*, *Ecclesia in America*, *Africae Munus*, and *Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission*.

Based on the need for solidarity and mutual enrichment, the Church in the United States and the Church in Nigeria are encouraged to engage more by mutually reading and exchanging each other's documents on the formation of the laity. The 2005 *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the 2009 *Manual of the Laity*, published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, among other things, treat contextually the identity, mission and theological formation of the laity in their respective contexts. *Co-workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* draw extensively from relevant Second Vatican Council documents and other post-conciliar teachings. Unlike the *Manual of the Laity*, it is addressed to a community that is flourishing with several financially stronger theological faculties with modern education facilities, including good libraries, computers, and smart classrooms, while *Manual of the Laity* is addressed to the poorer church in terms of finance, number and ages of theological faculties for the formation of her laity. This recognition opens doors for urgent appeals for more and deeper collaboration in areas of the Church and Institutions in the United States by supporting the training of the laity in our theological faculties and intuitions in Nigeria. This can come in the form of scholarships, exchange programs, research grants, and sabbatical opportunities for faculty members.

7. CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed, it is obvious the legacy of the Second Vatican Council is a story of accomplishment. It was a Council of change and renewal which signaled a great shift in the theology of the laity. The theology as we saw laid emphasis on the baptismal dignity of the laity through which the lay faithful, young and old, male and female, of all groups, contexts, cultures and associations listed above, have received their full membership in the Church and share actively in the mission of the Church. These aspects of the teachings of Vatican II and of several post-conciliar documents, including the 1983 Code of the Canon Law, found a special place in this paper. In sum, lay pastoral or ecclesial ministers in the Church in Africa, America, and even beyond are invited to mutually and collaboratively participate in the study of theology for their fruitful ministries and missions. The importance of their well-grounded theological training cannot be overemphasized in today's synodal Church during this challenging time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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