

## ABSTRACT

### REIMAGINING AFRICAN ECCLESIOLOGY: APPROPRIATING THE ECCLESIAL THOUGHT OF POPE FRANCIS FOR THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH IN KENYA

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This study examines African ecclesiology through the theological lens of Pope Francis (1936-2025) using Kenya as a case study. I argue that the Kenyan Catholic Church, historically shaped by a Eurocentric missionary heritage, needs renewal in the face of a rapidly changing sociocultural, political, economic, religious, and ecological reality. To support my claim for the need to revitalize the Church, I analyze the country's ecclesiastical history and select ecclesial documents. Based on these analytical findings, I propose the reimagination of the Church in Kenya, primarily drawing on Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. I explore the possibilities of appropriating dimensions of Francis's ecclesiology, such as his invitation to embrace "missionary discipleship," synodality, pastoral conversion, and the incorporation of the model Church-as-field-hospital, into the country's ecclesial landscape.

This research further places Francis's ecclesial vision in critical dialogue with the theological method of Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984) and the African theology of inculturation as developed by Laurenti Magesa (1946-2022). These two theologians serve as Francis's main theological interlocutors in this study. On one hand, Lonergan's theological method offers a framework for interpreting and appropriating Francis's ecclesial insights, particularly through its emphasis on historical consciousness, conversion, and the mediation between theological reflection and pastoral practice. On the other hand, Magesa's theology of inculturation anchors this study in the lived cultural, religious, and social contexts of Africa, providing resources for articulating a culturally contextual Kenyan ecclesiology responsive to the needs of local communities.

This work adopts an ecclesiology *from below*, identifying Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in parishes as places that foster theological reflection, thereby promoting ecclesial renewal. I examine SCCs as communities in which faith engages economic, cultural, political, social, religious, and ecological concerns, enabling a thriving ecclesial dynamism shaped by the lived experience of the people at the grassroots level to emerge. I hold this ecclesiology from below in a dialectical tension with an ecclesiology *from above*, represented by diocesan structures and the country's episcopal conference. I propose that this dialectical ecclesial relationship between the Church *from above* and *from below*, guided by Francis's ecclesiology, provides a pathway for ecclesial revitalization in Kenya.