Catholic theologians in the last forty-five years have developed the relatively new term "inculturation" to discuss the old problem of adapting the church universal to specific local cultures. The theologians' conception of inculturation is as a dialogue between Christianity (the church) and culture. Europeans required ten centuries to inculturate Christianity from its Judaic roots. The existence of the eastern churches in communion with the Roman Catholic church points to the time in history when there was greater development of the local churches and, consequently, greater inculturation of the church (i.e., prior to the schism of the eleventh century). As such, African efforts to make the church their own are a manifestation of the same process, but in a much shorter period of time.

The study that follows presumes that for "the dialogue between the church and culture" to occur there must be people with the requisite insider knowledge of the culture in place, and examines Jesuit perspectives on the formation of African religious women and men, and the African clergy in Southern Rhodesia in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1879,

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the Jesuits received responsibility from the Vatican for the “Mission of the Upper Zambezi,” which included territory in the modern states of Zimbabwe, Zambia, Congo, Mozambique, and Malawi. In 1890, Mozambique was separated and became the “Mission of the Lower Zambezi.” In the same year, two Jesuit missionaries served as chaplains to the British South Africa Company’s troops that invaded and established the colony of Southern Rhodesia. Consequently, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) received generous land grants from Cecil Rhodes’ company upon which to begin building the physical and human infrastructures of the Catholic church in colonial Zimbabwe.

There was a significant disjuncture in the discourse on the formation of local clergy and religious between the Vatican and the Jesuit missionaries responsible for the administration of the Zambezi Mission in Southern Rhodesia for much of the twentieth century. It would appear that the Jesuits had inculturated themselves into the dominant White Rhodesian culture, or at least adopted many of its attitudes with regard to race. Consequently, the Jesuits did not move to transfer leadership of women’s religious orders and diocesan structures to African nuns and priests until after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1964) in the mid-1960s and mid-1970s respectively. In short, Jesuit racist perspectives and (in)actions had a negative impact on the development of African religious orders and clergy.

This article will compare Vatican directives concerning the formation of indigenous religious institutes and clergy with Rhodesian Jesuit efforts to impede those developments. Although Jesuits were, in fact, responsible for establishing an order of nuns and the only Catholic major seminary prior to independence in 1980, it will be shown that they were responding grudgingly to the initiatives of the incipient Catholic hierarchy in doing so. Further, the evidence indicates that although they may not have seen African cultures on par with those of the West, the members of the Vatican Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) were more progressive in their outlook regarding the formation of African religious and priests than were European leaders of the Southern Rhodesian church, a situation that has a striking parallel with the Catholic church in the United States of America.

This study is based on archival research conducted primarily in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Harare and the Jesuit Archives of Zimbabwe from October 1999 to April 2000, and a relatively limited number of oral