

# The Second African Synod: Major Emphases and Challenges

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## ***Introduction***

As an event the Second Special Assembly of the Synod for Africa (second African Synod) took place in the Vatican from the 4th to the 25 October 2009. Of course every synod is a process as well as an event. As Peter Henriot rightly pointed out in a recent article,<sup>1</sup> the event or meeting is only the highpoint in a process that includes many steps from the preparation to the implementation. The preparation began in June 2005 when Pope Benedict XVI convoked the Synod and in a more focused way, the following year, when the document of Guidelines for Discussion (*Lineamenta*) was published, inviting a reflection and response to various questions from the entire family-of-God in Africa. Hopefully, the process will continue now with the implementation of the recommendations and commitments made in Rome through concrete action plans. In this paper I will be concerned mostly with the event of the Synod: its major emphases and challenges for the African Church. But first of all, a few words about the particular focus of this Second African Synod.

## ***The Particular Focus of the Synod***

While in continuity with the first African Synod of 1994 and its theme of evangelization, the particular focus of this Synod was on the *ad extra* dimension of the Church's mission, its prophetic role in society. This is clearly indicated in its full title: ***“The Church in Africa in the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: ‘You are the salt of the Earth ... you are the light of the World’ (Mt 5:13,14).”*** While the theme of the Synod was the prophetic mission of the Church to African

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<sup>1</sup> “The Second African Synod: Challenge and Help for our Future Church” in *Hekima Review*, December 2009, No 41, p. 9)

society, the Synod was, as Laurenti Magesa has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> primarily about the Church in Africa and how the Word of God entrusted to the Church can influence and enlighten the practical expression of justice in contemporary Africa (Proposition 34). The Synod did not set out to cure all of Africa's political, economic and social ills. That is not the task of the Church. It was concerned rather with how the Church in Africa can be a more authentic and effective agent of transformation ('salt' and light) in the current situation.

Taking place 14 years after the first African Synod, this Synod was not nearly as well prepared as was the first Synod. It did not arouse anything like the enthusiasm which accompanied that Synod, nor were the majority of African Catholics, lay, religious or clergy deeply engaged in the preparatory stages of the process. There were 250 participants in the Synod. This included 200 African bishops (representatives of the different African Episcopal Conferences), 20 bishops from outside of Africa, a number of Superiors General of Religious and Missionary Congregations working in Africa, and other invitees, including 25 women, both religious and lay. From all accounts, the event was a fruitful and important moment in the life of the Church in Africa. According to Peter Henriot, a sure sign that the Holy Spirit was at work in the assembly was the agreement that emerged during the final week of the Meeting regarding "the issues to be addressed, the structures to be put in place and actions to be encouraged. All these points found their way, in some form or other, into the two major documents of the Synod, a message of some 6500 words, and a set of Propositions, 57 in number, that contained specific recommendations".<sup>3</sup>

## **KEY EMPHASES AND CHALLENGES**

### ***1. Optimism tempered with Realism***

The Synod noted the increasing influence of Africa on the universal Church. Africa is a continent where the Catholic population has grown from 2 million to 165 million in little over a century. It is not a dark continent (as a book by Fr Fritz Stenger, Mafr

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<sup>2</sup> "The Second African Synod: Random Thoughts on a Process" in Hekima Review, December 2009, No. 5, pp 32-33

<sup>3</sup> Art. cit., p. 11.

noted some years back) but a continent marked by a youthful optimistic spirit with a new generation of leaders, lay, religious and clerical, determined to make the African Church more and a subject of history, a Church taking an increasingly prominent role in the mission of the Church (Message, no. 12). At the same time, there was an awareness among the Synod delegates that, while the Church in Africa is growing in numbers, it is not having the kind of impact upon society it should be having. As one of the delegates, Archbishop Palmer-Buckle of Ghana, stated: "The Church has transformed neither society nor itself... Where there has been corruption, Catholics have been involved, and where there has been violence Catholics have been among those instigating it." The Archbishop went on to add that Africans must stop blaming others for their problems, examine their consciences and put their own house in order.

The Final Message of the Synod, without drowning us in pessimism, paints a grim, but realistic picture of the reality of Africa today. While "rich in human and natural resources, many of our people are still left to wallow in poverty and misery, wars and conflicts, crises and chaos". These evils, the Synod asserts, are mainly the product of "human decisions and activities by people who have no regard for the common good and this often through a tragic complicity and criminal conspiracy of local leaders and foreign interests" (Message, no. 5). The appropriate response to such evils, however, is not despair but ever greater and more concerted commitment from the Church Family-of-God to those deprived of freedom and peace, those violated in their dignity as human beings, those who "suffer poverty, diseases, injustice, wars, violence, and forced migration." In his homily during the closing Eucharist celebration of the Synod, Pope Benedict called on the Church to become "a community of reconciled persons, operators of justice and peace; salt and light amongst the society of men and nations – and thus a potent leaven of reconciliation of reconciliation in each country". In these words, then, the Pope enunciates the fundamental challenge of the Synod. A second key emphasis of the Synod arising from this challenge is the need for greater unity and solidarity within the African Church.

## **2. Greater Unity and Solidarity within the African Church**

One of the reasons for the failure of the African Church to fulfill its potential as an agent for the transformation of African society at large, is its lack of unity, its failure to be true to its calling as the 'Family-of-God'. The Synod made it clear that the African Church itself must be transformed if it is to be an effective catalyst in the transformation of society. Can the Church effect change in society? Yes, it can was the ringing affirmation of the Synod, but only if all its members collaborate effectively. "An army of well-organized ants can bring down an elephant" (Message, no. 15). All members of the Church - clergy, religious and lay faithful - must be mobilised to work together in the unity that brings strength" (Ibid.).

Proposition 3, emphasising the model of Church as communion, calls on bishops, priests, deacons, religious and the laity "to further strengthen their cooperation at the diocesan, national, continental and intercontinental levels." The Synod calls on bishops to ensure that their dioceses are "models of good governance, transparency, and good financial management" (Message, no. 19) and "to put issues of reconciliation, justice and peace high up on the pastoral agenda" of their dioceses. Addressing priests, the Synod calls on them to give an example of unity by "living together in peace across tribal and racial lines" and to "welcome gladly whoever the Holy See appoints as bishops over [them], irrespective of place of birth" (Message, no. 20). Addressing religious, it exhorts them "to give maximum effectiveness to [their] apostolate through loyal and committed communion with the local hierarchy" (Message, no. 21).

The Synod also underlines the need to strengthen institutions of organic solidarity in Africa, such as SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of African and Madagascar) and COMSAM (Conferences of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar) and to further develop organs of intercontinental collaboration and support. Proposition, no. 4 calls on the African bishops "to revive existing structures of ecclesial communion" and promote other structures such as: a continental council of the clergy; a continental council of the laity; and a continental council for Catholic women."

### ***3. The Priority of Forgiveness, Pardon and Reconciliation in the struggle for Justice and Peace***

We are accustomed to think of justice as a prerequisite for forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. However the Synod gives priority to forgiveness, pardon and reconciliation over justice. Justice, it argues, is the fruit of forgiveness and reconciliation and this is because “God justifies the sinner by overlooking his or her sins, or one justifies an offender by pardoning his or her faults. And because God has justified us by forgiving our sins, so as to reconcile us to himself, we too can work out just relationships and structures among ourselves and in our societies, through pardoning and overlooking peoples’ faults out of love and mercy. How else can we live in community and communion” (Proposition 14).

In the process of reconciliation, the Message of the Synod tells us, “the virtue of pardon is crucial, even before admission of guilt. Those who say that pardon does not work should try revenge and see. True pardon promotes the justice of repentance and reparation, leading to a peace that goes to the roots of conflict, making friends, brothers and sisters out of former victims and enemies. Since it is God who makes this kind of reconciliation possible, we must give adequate place to prayer and the sacraments in this ministry, especially the Sacrament of Penance” (Message, no. 8).

This priority of forgiveness and reconciliation over justice only makes sense from a perspective of faith. An intra-worldly, humanist approach will always give priority to justice. However, as the Synod reminds us in Proposition 9, the Christian standpoint is unique. Its approach to conflict resolution and peace building is grounded in a spirituality of reconciliation based on the initiative of God: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:19,20).

Laurenti Magesa, however, disagrees with this ordering of the relationships between reconciliation, justice and peace and insists that it is justice that must be given

priority.<sup>4</sup> “To place reconciliation at the foundation of the process of justice and peace”, he argues, “seems to preempt the more fundamental aspect of justice as a prerequisite of both reconciliation and peace.”<sup>5</sup> For Magesa, justice should be the starting point and goal of the process of reconciliation. Otherwise, he claims, we end up with the kind of superficial process that, in his view, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) engaged in: “Because the foundational principle of justice was deliberately kept in the background for fear of jeopardising the process, the TRC cannot be said to have achieved the ultimate goal of a reconciled South Africa. Whatever other causes may be adduced the current simmering of resentment in that nation, it is primarily due to this failure. The ugly head of xenophobia recently witnessed there is just one extension of that reality.”<sup>6</sup>

I disagree with Magesa. Certainly the struggle for justice must always be part and parcel of the process of reconciliation and peace building, but it is surely questionable whether we will ever establish perfect justice on this earth. Is it not likely that a struggle for justice that is not set in the context of a higher ethic that includes virtues like mercy, forgiveness and compassion easily degenerates into a fanatical concern for the righting of wrongs which is more likely to perpetuate rather than transform conflict? Robert Mudida, a Kenyan lecturer in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building at Hekima College, makes the point that a justice not motivated by love, and tempered by mercy and compassion, will not bring about lasting peace. In writing about the Church’s unique contribution to building peace he quotes Tarimo and Manuela as follows:

From psychological and religious perspectives, forgiveness transforms the victim, the perpetrator, and other members of society. Personal repentance and forgiveness, combined with public truth-telling make the process of reconciliation complete. The approach is constructive because victims consumed by hatred and the desire to revenge cannot build a healthy society. This is because their energy and resources are used to plan for revenge. The process of learning to overcome pain and resentment creates goals to pursue. On the part of the victim, the process cultivates compassion

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<sup>4</sup> Art. cit, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Art. cit., p. 32

and acknowledges the effort of repenting demonstrated by the perpetrator. The courage to forgive requires a personal sacrifice that cannot be imposed authoritatively.<sup>7</sup>

Having acknowledged the unique resources of mercy and compassion that the Church brings to the process of reconciliation and peace building, it is, nevertheless, essential that the Church, in conjunction with other groups, should continue to promote ever greater justice in society. In this regard, the the principles and guidelines of the *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching* are particularly valuable but, as Mudida points out, they will be more effectively used in the African context “if they are seen to reinforce traditional African notions of justice” and tied into the guiding principle of *ubuntu*” which is at the heart of African social philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. Empowerment of Women: from Praise to Commitment**

A fourth key emphasis of the Synod is its clear acknowledgement of the vital role of women in the Church and in African society, and a commitment to giving them a greater say in Church governance. A number of Religious sisters were invited to address the Synod. One of those who spoke was Sr Felicia Harry, Superior General of the OLA. She stressed that collaboration between men and women in the Church does not mean men making the decisions while women do the work. It means that women are involved also in the decision-making process. She drew an enthusiastic round of applause when she asked the bishops, following their night prayer, and before retiring to bed, to take a few minutes to do an exercise of Ignatian imaginative contemplation and try to picture what the African Church would be like without women. A Zambian sister, Mary Ann Katiti, Provincial Superior of the Kasisi sisters, stated that “women have no real voice when it comes to their places and rights, and their contribution to evangelisation”.<sup>9</sup> An intervention by a Congolese sister highlighted the fact that women in Africa bear a disproportionate share of the

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<sup>7</sup> From A. Tarimo and P. Manuela, *African Peacemaking and Governance* (Nairobi: Acton), 2007, and quoted by Mudida in “Enhancing the Role of the Church in Conflict Transformation in Africa” in *Hekima Review*, December 2009, p. 125

<sup>8</sup> Mudida, art. cit., p. 125.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Henriot, art. cit., p. 15.

burden arising from the various crises affecting Africa today- from poverty, disease to violence and social disintegration.

It would seem that the Synod responded to these pleas from the Sisters. The Final Message of the Synod acknowledges “the specific contribution of women, not only in the house as wife and mother but also in the social sphere” and recommends that the local Churches in Africa “to put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women at appropriate levels.” Proposition 47 of the Synod commits the Church to “greater integration of women into Church structures and the decision making process”. This is quite a commitment and a major challenge for a male dominated institution. It will surely be interesting to see how well it is implemented.

### **5. Good Governance and the Formation for African Leaders**

While acknowledging the efforts to improve governance in Africa at the political level through the African Union (AU) and, at the economic level, through the strategic framework of the **New Economic Partnership for African Development** (NEPAD) and the **African Peer Review Mechanism** (Message, no. 34), the Synod reserved one of its strongest attacks for African political leaders, describing their performance, with a few exceptions, as “woeful” (Message, no. 36). The reason for their shamefully bad governance, the Synod suggests, is that these leaders pursue “greed for power and wealth at the expense of the people and nation. Whatever may be the responsibility of foreign interests, there is always the shameful and tragic collusion of local leaders: politicians who betray and sell out their nations, dirty business people who collude with rapacious multinationals, African arms dealers and traffickers who thrive on small arms that cause havoc on human lives and local agents of some international organisations who get paid for peddling toxic ideologies that they don’t believe in” (Ibid.).

Apart from engaging in diatribes what should the Church be doing to promote better governance in Africa. Proposition 25 of the Synod provides the answer. It states that the role of the Church is “to offer present and future leaders a fitting doctrinal, pastoral, practical formation as well as spiritual support (by setting up chaplaincies).

The Synod draws attention to the value of the *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching* as a tool for this purpose. In addition, it calls on Catholic Universities to “establish faculties of political science” and on all African Episcopal Conferences “to promote multi-dimensional programmes of civic education; implement programmes to foster the formation of a social conscience at all levels; and encourage competent and honest citizens to participate in party politics”(Ibid.). It might also have suggested naming and shaming these corrupt and often autocratic leaders, especially by African Episcopal Conferences, and perhaps even naming and shaming Church leaders who compromise themselves by accepting bribes from these politicians and supporting them.

## **6. Resisting the negative effects of Globalisation on Africa.**

In the 15 years between the first and second African Synods, the impact of the phenomenon of “Globalisation” on Africa has become ever more pronounced. The Synod was careful not to condemn the entire process of globalisation (Proposition 31). It is not evil in itself, but in some of its effects such as the “new global ethic” being propounded by the U.N., the World Bank and the IMF. This ethic is, in the words of the final Message “undermining African traditional values and pushing Africans towards an acceptance of abortion and homosexuality. Thus Catholic families are warned “to be on their guard against virulent ideological poisons from abroad, claiming to modern culture” (Message, no. 24). African women are warned “to ensure that good ideas are not hijacked by the peddlers of foreign and morally poisonous ideologies about gender and human sexuality” (Message, no. 25).

Under this heading (globalisation) the Aid agencies from the Western world come in for criticism. While commending the good work they are doing in combatting poverty, promoting development, defending the rights of women and children, and combatting diseases such as AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis, the bishops denounced “surreptitious attempts to destroy and undermine the precious African values of family and human life” (Message, no. 30). They expressed particular concern about article 14/2c the Maputo Protocol which pledges “to protect the reproductive rights of women by authorizing medical abortion in cases of sexual assault, rape, incest, and where

continued pregnancy endangers the mental and physical health of the mother or the life of the mother or the foetus.” This article, according to Proposition 20, “trivializes the seriousness of the crime of abortion and devalues the role childbearing.”

## ***7. Environmental Protection and Reconciliation with Creation***

In line with the thinking of the present Pope, the Synod condemns the abuse of God’s beautiful creation and the “exploitation of natural resources beyond what is sustainable and useful” by “governments and multinational and transnational companies engaged in businesses that pollute the environment, destroy flora and fauna, thus causing unprecedented erosion and desertification of large areas of arable land” (Proposition 22). The Synod calls on the African Churches to a) promote environmental education and awareness; b) persuade their local and national governments to adopt policies and binding legal regulations for the protection of the environment and to promote alternative and renewable sources of energy; and c) encourage all to plant trees and treat nature with respect (Proposition 22). Finally, it commits the Church in Africa “to establish a desk in various countries of the continent to monitor the management of natural resources” (Proposition 29).

## ***Other Important Issues and Challenges***

1. The Synod clearly affirms the ministry of Advocacy to address the injustices of “the global economic system, which continues to marginalise Africa” (Proposition 29). I would like to note here the intervention of Kieran O’Reilly, SMA Superior General, on the concerted commitment of many Religious and Missionary Congregations, through the AFJN and A/EFJN networks, to ensure that the concerns of Africans are addressed in the corridors of economic power in the Western world.
2. The Synod recommends the use of the sacramental and non-sacramental forms of reconciliation and the creation of a “Sprituality of Reconciliation” (Propositions, 6,7,8,and 9).
3. Reiterating the recommendation of the first African Synod, this second Synod highlighted the importance of the process of inculturation and called for the creations of inculturated forms of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This should be done with prudence and be based upon an in-depth study of traditional African ceremonies of reconciliation (Proposition 7) and further scientific research on African cultures and religion (Proposition 13). I noted that

Proposition 13 also highlights the need “to liberate Africans from the scourge” of witchcraft and cults and to devise “a pastoral programme that is grounded in rationality, deliverance and reconciliation”. It is worthy of note that the Synod adopts a critical and discerning approach to African cultures and to ATR.

4. The Synod calls for the promotion of an in-depth knowledge of the *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching* (CST) in all formation programmes of seminaries, in catechetical programmes, and in programmes of ongoing formation for the priests, religious, and the laity (Proposition 18). These formation programmes should include courses in peace studies and conflict resolution (Proposition 21).
5. It urges a more active and intensive commitment of the Church to conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and peace building, including the establishment of “peace-building Councils” at diocesan, national and regional levels, and the establishment of “an African Peace and Solidarity initiative” and “a permanent organisation for inter-ethnic dialogue” at continental level (Proposition 21). I am not too sure what is meant by this latter organisation or how it will function in practice. We wait and see.
6. As expected, the Synod calls for a continuation of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, especially dialogue with Islam and ATR (Propositions 10,11 & 13).
7. The Synod urges the continuation and strengthening of an holistic pastoral response to those afflicted by the AIDS pandemic. It requests SECAM to produce a HIV/AIDS pastoral manual for all those involved in the Church’s AIDS ministry ... applying the Church’s moral and social doctrine in the different situations, where the People of God in Africa are facing the various challenges of the pandemic.” (Proposition 51). It is hard to say exactly where the Synod stands on the issue of allowing the use of condoms for couples in which one of the partners HIV positive. The final statement of Proposition 51 which advocates helping such couples “to inform and form their consciences, so that they might choose what is right, with full responsibility for the greater good of each other, their union and their family” seems to suggest that here is a situation where the canonical principle of *epikeia* may be applied and the use of condoms permitted. It will be interesting to see whether or not Pope Benedict integrates this statement of Proposition 51 into his post-Synodal Exhortation.
8. The Synod highlights the need of greater respect for ethnic diversity, and calls on the Church to tap into “the positive values of these diversities” and to seek a “unity in diversity, rather than in uniformity” (Proposition 32). Surely, the

witness of international religious and missionary congregations and societies is of the utmost importance in this respect.

9. Finally the Synod urges greater support for the NEPAD – Peer Review Mechanism within the AU by African Episcopal Conferences (Proposition 24). It is disappointing that so few African countries have agreed to let their performance be assessed by this mechanism. As the Final Messages bluntly states: “For most African nations the beautiful documents of NEPAD are still a dead letter” (Message, no. 34). Are these countries seriously committed to good governance? One wonders!

## ***Conclusion***

To conclude, the Synod has set out a truly challenging and comprehensive agenda for the African Church as it strives to be “salt” and “light” for the people of a continent with enormous potential, yet struggling to emerge from the shackles of poverty and disease, violence and social breakdown. Certainly, the African Church has the potential to be what Pope Benedict calls “a potent leaven” for healing, reconciliation and integral development for the people of that Continent. But only if it sets itself to vigorously and systematically implement its challenging agenda. This agenda must not remain simply words on a page.

A number of commentaries on the Synod that I have read<sup>10</sup> have pointed out that the reason for the failure of the first African Synod was its lack of a clear plan of action. This must not happen again. The proposals and recommendation of this second Synod must be accompanied by a clear action plans, with specific targets, a time-frame for implementation and evaluation, and naming those responsible for ensuring that the plan is implemented, and that its implementation is regularly evaluated. Unless this is done the event of the Synod will be another dead letter like NEPAD. In this regard, the African Bishops have surely something to learn from the methodology used with remarkable consistency and no small success by missionary and religious congregations and societies in their chapters and assemblies for the past 30 years. With a clear plan of action and a wholehearted determination to implement the Synod’s agenda, the African Church can make a great contribution in leading the Continent “safely to the port of reconciliation, justice and peace.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Henriot, art. cit, p. 11. Cf also, Laurenti Magesa, art. cit, pp. 35-37.