

# AFRICAN SYNOD CONFIRMS JESUIT MISSION OF FAITH AND JUSTICE

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In 1972, during the well-known and widely appreciated 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, we Jesuits were committed to fulfill the mission of “the service of the faith and the promotion of justice.” The mission was reconfirmed in the 33<sup>rd</sup>, 34<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> General Congregations. There was often a clarification of its bold meaning but never a retreat from its radical orientation.

I had the opportunity to be a delegate at GC 33, which came at a time of considerable controversy following the intervention of Pope John Paul II regarding the ordinary governance of the Society. Many had speculated that the Pope’s known criticism of some social activism on the part of the Church (e.g., his antipathy to liberation theology) might have an influence on the Society’s commitment to the faith and justice mission. That was not to be the case, and GC 33 explicitly re-affirmed the mission.

Today, the Society stands together under that banner of “faith and justice,” several times re-affirmed by our new Father General, Adolfo Nicolas.

## SYNOD OUTCOME

The reason I mention this at the beginning of an article about something significant from the recently concluded Second African Synod is that if one clear thing could be said about the Synod it would be that it stated *a strong confirmation of a faith and justice mission*. Without using those exact words, the Synod final *Message* and set of *Propositions* repeatedly emphasised that the Church’s proper mission is the promotion of justice, a justice founded on God’s word. For example, the Bishops commit themselves “to being architects of just structures in our societies, in the light of the Justice which comes from God” (*Propositions* #14).

It is very understandable that this Second African Synod (officially, “The Second Special Assembly of Bishops for Africa”) would take this stance when considering the *Message* of the First African Synod in April 1994 and the follow-up Letter of John Paul II, *The Church in Africa* (1995). The Synod then had as its theme “Evangelisation” and had explored five appropriate themes: proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace, and communication. Justice and Peace became the topic most often spoken to by the Bishops, mindful that they sat in Rome at the outbreak of the Rwandan genocide and the eve of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration.

## SYNOD CONTEXT

Much has happened on the Continent in the intervening 15 years, as wars and conflicts raged on the Horn of Africa and in Western Africa. When Pope John Paul II announced the Second African Synod in 2004, therefore, it was no shock that “reconciliation, justice and peace” would become the chosen topic. As the Guidelines for Discussion (*Lineamenta*) clearly stated:

In Africa’s current historical, social, political, cultural and religious circumstances, the Church-Family of God draws her energy from Christ, the ever-living Word of God, so that she can overcome weariness and thoughts of surrender and free herself from all forms of oppression. In fact, Christ invites her to bear the yoke of his love and find refreshment in him for a new life, and to receive the enthusiasm and light to dispel the

many dark clouds which hang over the peoples of Africa in these times. (*Lineamenta* #4)

And I doubt if I am alone in expressing my pleasant surprise to read very strong discussion of justice in the Agenda (*Instrumentum Laboris*). Three dimensions of justice were spoken of: socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural (*Instrumentum Laboris* #s 56, 57, 58). Here is only one example of the analysis and the call:

In some places, natural resources are confiscated and depleted by special-interest groups. Bad management, the diverting of public funds and the exodus of capital to foreign banks—already denounced by the Church in Africa at the last synod -- are forms of injustice which are done with impunity. The Church must speak out against these unjust practices, raising her voice for the voiceless. (#57)

When the 200-plus Bishops from all over Africa gathered in Rome at the start of October, it was clear that the message of justice would not be muted. Joined by a few dozen Bishop-delegates from Roman curial offices and other continents, and by experts and representatives of church organisations, the African delegates addressed the topics with an openness that enabled the final *Message* to provide “fresh inspiration and encouragement for the tasks and challenges that lie ahead” (#1).

## **INSPIRATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT**

As part of the advisory team called to Rome to assist the AMECEA Bishops, I myself felt inspired and encouraged as I watched the delegates grapple with social justice issues ranging from war to poverty, women to refugees, family to youth, foreign aid to micro-finance schemes, HIV and AIDS to climate change, etc., etc. The language used at time was quite blunt, but purposely chosen to be sure the message was not diluted. One sentence from the *Message* that has subsequently been often quoted applied to persons in public leadership roles who are Catholics:

Many Catholics in high office have fallen woefully short in their performance in office. The Synod calls on such people to repent, or quit the public arena and stop causing havoc to the people and giving the Catholic Church a bad name (#23).

When one Bishop objected that such language was not “diplomatic,” he was told by the Chair that so be it, the time has come for such “undiplomatic” expressions!

Realism was introduced into the Synod Hall in Rome by interventions from Bishops and others who spoke from their practical experience of situations of injustice in their local areas. I was touched by the comments of Bishops from Kenya who told of the trauma of post-election violence, and I was moved by a Religious Sister from Rwanda who narrated her experience of reconciliation with a man who had murdered several in her family.

Pope Benedict XVI sat through at least 50% of the general sessions, and he took time to personally greet as many of the participants as possible. His homilies at the opening and closing liturgies in St. Peter’s Basilica were, in my opinion, crafted to provide the spiritual support so necessary for the implementation of the tasks of reconciliation, justice and peace.

But it was in the remarks the Pope made to the delegates at the close of the Synod that I heard again the echo of our own Jesuit General Congregations 32 to 35. He spoke strongly of the need to keep faith and justice together, by avoiding the two temptations to either over-politicise the theme of reconciliation, justice and peace or to over-spiritualise it. The first

temptation would be to ignore the spiritual dimension of the task; the second temptation would be to become overly spiritual and abstract, not really addressing the task.

## JESUIT RESPONSES

So what contribution can we Jesuits make to the implementation of the Second African Synod? Surely social centres such as Hakimani and JCTR must take up the agenda of the Synod and in cooperation with the Bishops Conferences apply it practically in our own local contexts. And scholasticates such as Arrupe and Hekima must form our young Jesuits in the church social teaching that brings together faith and justice.

In our various other apostolates in Africa, I believe we can serve in a variety of ways. Our parishes should promote reflection and action on the Synod documents, those now released and the up-coming *Letter* of the Pope, through homilies and guidance to the small Christian communities. Our schools should be models of forming youth with the values of the church social teaching, especially with its practical application to local situations.

Our retreat houses and spirituality centres should make a special effort to assist leaders in public life – government officials and politicians, business people and other professionals – to be assisted pastorally to live out their Catholic faith in the social sphere in which they have responsibilities. Our communication ministries should make the message of the Synod widely available through a variety of services.

But overall, it seems to me, we can go forward in whatever we do with an encouraging experience of the ratification and legitimation of our Jesuit mission of the service of faith and the promotion of justice. *Here in Africa in the foreseeable future, if we are servants of the Church, then we are men of faith and justice in commitment to the implementation of the Synod.*

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