

THE SECOND AFRICAN SYNOD: CHALLENGE AND HELP FOR OUR FUTURE CHURCH

Abstract

The Second African Synod is a process that includes preparation, meeting and implementation around the theme of “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” The meeting at the Vatican in October 2009 produced a *Message* as well as a set of *Propositions* to assist Pope Benedict XVI to write a final *Letter*. High points of the meeting included emphases on hopefulness, spirituality, church social teaching, public leadership, women, and HIV and AIDS. The challenge of the Synod process is to balance a political engagement with a spiritual foundation. Synodal documents legitimate the “faith and justice” emphasis of the Jesuits and the Church in Africa. But stronger stress needs to be put on the “option for the poor.”

According to the opening paragraph of the official *Message* coming from the recently completed Second African Synod, this historic gathering in Rome from 04 to 25 October 2009 was a

... providential opportunity to celebrate the blessings of the Lord on our continent, to assess our stewardship as Pastors of God’s flock, and to seek fresh inspiration and encouragement for the tasks and challenges that lie ahead.¹

Because I experienced something of that *fresh inspiration and encouragement* of this Synod, I want to share three points in describing what our Church in Africa is currently undergoing in this exciting journey called “Second African Synod,” or, more formally, “The Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa.”

First, some description of the *process* of this Synod, since it is indeed a *process* and not simply an *event*.

Second, some *high points* of the Synod that I consider to be of particular relevance in providing a sound foundation for “faith and justice” activities in Africa.

Third, some hints at the *implications* of this Synod for the future of the Church that we are moving into here in Africa.

My reflections arise from my own participation in the process of the Synod, as an Advisor to the Secretariat of the Association of Member Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) and to the Zambia Episcopal Conference (ZEC). In the capacity of Advisor, I participated in the Synod event during October 2009 in Rome.²

¹Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, *Message*, #1.

²For background, see Peter Henriot, “Catholic Social Teaching: A Resource for the Second African Synod,” in *The Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, Harare: AFCAST, 2009, pp. 7-11; Peter Henriot and Dominic Liche, *Church in Africa – Relevant and Credible: The Challenge of the Second Africa Synod*, Lusaka: JCTR, 2008; and Peter Henriot, “Justice, Peace, Reconciliation and Forgiveness: Theological and Conceptual Underpinnings and Linkages,” in *Amecea Synod Delegates Workshop: Shaping the Prophetic Voice of the Region*, Nairobi: AMECEA, 2009, pp. 37-49.

PROCESS OF THE SYNOD

The Second African Synod bore the full title, “The Church in Africa at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: ‘You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world.’” (Matthew 5: 14-14).

It is very important to appreciate that this Synod is not simply an *event* that occurred for three weeks in Rome. It is indeed a *process* that has been moving through three phases or moments: preparation, meeting and implementation.

Preparation

First, we had the *preparation* for the Synod. Announced by the late Pope John Paul II on 13 November 2004, and convoked on 22 June 2005 by Pope Benedict XIV, this Synod was seen as a follow-up to the First African Synod held during April 1994. But why this theme of “reconciliation, justice and peace” chosen for this particular Synod?

The First Synod had as its theme “Evangelisation” which included the promotion of justice and peace. But the sad history of Africa during the past 15 years has seen too little of genuine justice and peace, with conflicts and wars raging across the Continent. The need to focus on reconciliation was felt very strongly throughout the Church in Africa.

Thus the preparation for the Synod was centered around a document of *Guidelines for Discussion (Lineamenta)*, which encouraged Catholics throughout Africa to reflect on what was happening in their local contexts relating to the Church’s role in serving the people through promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace.³ Responses to the issues raised during these reflections were forwarded to the Synod Secretariat at the Vatican, and in March of 2009 the Synod’s *Guidelines for Business or Agenda (Instrumentum Laboris)* was brought to Africa by Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Cameroun and Angola.⁴

Personally I was pleasantly surprised by the tone and content of the *Agenda*. It did not hesitate to name the serious issues facing the people of Africa today or to challenge the Church to move into effective action in the service of the people. If it lacked anything, it was an overall *analytical framework* within which to situate the various challenges. But those of us familiar with the CST know that this is a not uncommon failing in church documents: *good descriptions of events but weak analysis of causes of the events*.⁵

A pertinent question that could be put to many of us who have been involved in pastoral work or teaching within church circles is: how much did we participate in promoting wide involvement in the preparation of the Second Africa Synod? As one who was actively involved in the First Africa Synod, I think I can fairly say that here in Zambia we did not have much active participation prior to the Synod. This could be explained by factors such as focus on the review of the Republican Constitution, the election of 2006, followed by the death of our President and the subsequent election of 2008, and the general absorption of energies by the majority of our population facing serious poverty and hunger situation.

But as part of the process of preparation at the AMECEA level, there was a series of meetings, one in Lusaka in 2008 and two in Nairobi in 2009. These brought together Bishops and some of us as “advisors.”

³ *Lineamenta*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2006

⁴ *Instrumentum Laboris*: Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2009

⁵ For further discussion of the importance of social analysis, see Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983.

Meeting

The second moment in this synod process was the actual meeting of the participants of the Synod which began deliberations in the first week of October. Approximately 200 bishop delegates gathered from over 50 African countries and another 20 or so bishop delegates from other continents. There were also priest, religious and lay representatives who participated in the sessions, as well as advisors who contributed by assisting in preparation of speeches and other documents. The Synod Hall, immediately next to St. Peter's Basilica, was furnished with the latest of audio-visual equipment and simultaneous translations – and comfortable seats and delicious tea snacks!

The fact that some non-African church representatives participated, as well as ecumenical representatives was a sign of what the final document called “effective and affective collegiality”⁶ – good solidarity around an important moment in the life of the Church in Africa.

It is important to note the Synod opened and closed with huge Eucharistic celebrations in St. Peter's, and that each session was marked with significant periods of prayer. This reinforced what Pope Benedict had said at the start, that the Synod “is not primarily a study session. Rather it is God's initiative, calling us to listen: listen to God, to one another and to the world around us, in an atmosphere of prayer and reflection.”⁷

Indeed, there was plenty of listening, as each Synod delegate had the chance to offer brief interventions at the start and then engage in lively discussions in small groups. Many, including myself, felt that the process of one speech after another, even if limited in time to four to five minutes, was a bit overwhelming since no logical order of topic or theme or focus was followed. (The Vatican Press Office kept up with the process with daily *Bulletins* containing a précis of each intervention and a summary of general discussions.⁸)

But surely a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit is that as the Synod deliberations moved into the third and final week, some clear lines of emphasis were emerging. These lines related to issues to be addressed, structures to be put in place and actions to be encouraged. All of points found their way in some form or another 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. These two documents are to feed into a *Letter* to be written by the Pope in the next year officially launching the follow-up to the Synod.

Implementation

The third moment in this Synodal process is the follow-up or implementation. This will involve a period of instruction about the significance of the Synod, circulation and hopefully translation and simplification of the documents (including, of course, the Pope's special *Letter*), many workshops and courses, design of formation programmes, etc.

But of course the most important part of the follow-up will be actual realisation of the activities and structures called for in the Synod documents. For example, when the call has been made to “put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women ‘at appropriate levels,’”⁹ then we should be able to see some action taking place all over the

⁶ *Message*, #6.

⁷ *Message*, #2,

⁸ Go to http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/sinodo_index_en.htm

⁹ *Message*, #25.

Continent. This means strategic plans must be made, timelines laid down, priorities established, and “monitoring and evaluation” mechanisms set up.

Many have felt that a real fault of the First African Synod was failure to put in place effective implementation measures to draw out the power and beauty of that event. The current hope and prayer is that such a failure will not occur as it relates to the Second African Synod. Already many of the Continent’s Episcopal Conferences are putting in place follow-up steps to be taken to be sure that the power and beauty of the Synod is not lost.

HIGH POINTS OF THE SYNOD

There is much to unpack in the documents of the Synod, especially the Message and the Propositions. For our purposes here, however, I wish to be very selective and mention only a few highpoints of what I consider to be some of the most important points emerging from the Synod. This is not doing justice to the overall outcome of the Synod, but at least helps to focus on several points of great significance.

Hopefulness

If I were to emphasise only one aspect of the outcome of the Synod, it would be a spirit of hope. Yes, hope! Hard to imagine about a Continent wracked with so many problems: social, economic, political, ecological, religious, etc. But hope was a point emphasised right from the start of this Synodal process, reflected in the *Guidelines*, *Agenda* and opening remarks of the Pope; repeated often in the interventions in the general sessions and working groups; put forth repeatedly in the final documents.

Here are five of the many comments that might be cited, as demonstrating this spirit of hope, the first four from the final *Message*, the last from the *Propositions*:

... Africa must not despair. The blessings of God are still abundant, waiting to be prudently and justly employed for the good of her children. Where the conditions are right, her children have proved that they can reach, and have indeed reached, the height of human endeavours and competence. There is much good news in many parts of Africa.¹⁰

We should not be afraid of, less still be discouraged, by the enormity of the problems of our continent.¹¹

The future history of the continent is still to be written. God has blessed us with vast natural and human resources.¹²

... Africa is not helpless. Our destiny is still in our hands.¹³

...the Synod Fathers, in communion with the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, view this Second Special Assembly as the Synod of a “New Pentecost”.¹⁴

It is a spirit of hope coming from the fact that Africa was the cradle of human civilisation, Africa was the receiver of Jesus the refugee, Africa is the home of the most vibrant Christian

¹⁰ *Message*, #6

¹¹ *Message*, #15

¹² *Message*, #34

¹³ *Message*, #42

¹⁴ *Propositions*, #2

community in the world today. And in this spirit of hope the Synod frequently heard the calls, “Africa, rise up.”

Spirituality

In so many ways, the Synodal process must be one of *spiritual renewal*. It is the recognition that “the initiative for all reconciliation and peace comes from God” and that the Church’s strategies in all this “must go beyond and deeper than how the world handles these matters” (M#8).¹⁵ I would stress that it is a “spirituality of reconciliation” that must pervade the post-Synod implementation.

Why do I say that? I stress that as I recall what our JCTR Inculturation Task Force study paper on reconciliation stated a few years ago.¹⁶ That is, we must acknowledge the six aspects of integral reconciliation: with God, with the neighbour, with the community, with the ancestors, with the earth, with the self. It is not enough to reach simply a political agreement, or a judicial settlement, or a personal handshake. Spirituality is a way of life. Drawing upon the deepest sources of our religious traditions and human ethics, it enables us to take opening initiatives and lasting steps.

Something of significance came up often in the Synod discussions and this is the need for a renewal of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Most Catholics in Africa (indeed, in all other Continents!) would honestly acknowledge that the Sacrament has in recent years fallen out of use in its traditional ritual and practice. Yet it remains for us Catholics an important moment of grace. And so the *Propositions* make repeated emphasis on this fact in stressing the spirituality of reconciliation. For example:

God’s grace creates a new heart in us and reconciles us with himself and with others. An essential element of “reconciliation” is the Sacrament of Reconciliation..... It is a matter of restoring a great importance to the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance in its dual aspects: personal and communal.¹⁷

At both personal and pastoral levels, this is indeed a serious challenge for priests at this time.

Church Social Teaching

It would be a gross misrepresentation of the Synod if we missed the fact that the centrality of the church social teaching (CST) is emphasised during the whole process – preparation, meeting and implementation. Certainly, those of us associated with the promotion of the CST can rejoice in the ringing calls for stronger formation at every level of our community in the lessons of CST and greater influence in public policy debates and decisions of the values of CST. As might be expected, the most cited document during the Synod was the Bible, and rightly so. But the second most cited document was the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, a rich resource of CST that was prepared by the Vatican a few years ago.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Message*, #8

¹⁶ JCTR Inculturation Task Force, *Reconciliation with an Inculturated Spirit: A Working Paper Designed to Promote Reflection, Prayer, Discussion and Action to Deal with Challenges of Conflict and Tension in Families and Communities*, Lusaka: Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, 2008.

¹⁷ *Propositions*, #5.

¹⁸ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005.

Indeed, the *Message* emphasises that “There is no excuse to remain ignorant in the faith”¹⁹ and calls for an effective catechesis that must include the CST to promote integral formation.

We should continue to work hard on forming consciences and changing hearts, through effective catechesis at all levels. This must go beyond the “simple catechism” for children and catechumens preparing for the sacraments. We need to put in place an on-going formation programme for all our faithful, especially those in high positions of authority.²⁰

I was told by one participant in the Rome meeting that when he returned home he would push that the number one priority for implementation of the Synod should be adult formation in the church social teaching. Why such a high priority? For the obvious reason that formation which leads to action can transform the current status of our African societies. The CST pillars of human dignity and rights, community and solidarity, option for the poor and care for the integrity of creation are indeed central to the integral and sustainable development of our people and our communities.

Public Leadership

An element in the Synod discussions that earned considerable media attention was the emphasis on the consequences – *good and bad* – of public leadership. Such emphasis is not surprising. Pope Benedict, during his visit to Cameroun and Angola in March of this year, spoke boldly about the impact of the failure of many African political leaders to really serve their people. But the Synod *Message* picks up the concerns of many if not most of the Synod delegates that such failure is having disastrous consequences for Africa.

Again and again, delegates speak of the corruption and lack of integrity which brought low their countries. Early in the *Message* there is the frank admission that Africans “wallow in poverty and misery, wars and conflicts, crisis and chaos” that is simply unacceptable in a Continent so rich in human and natural resources. And why?

These are very rarely caused by natural disasters. They are largely due to 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.²¹

Cases can be cited in almost every country on the African continent of such “tragic complicity and criminal conspiracy prevalent” among the elected, appointed, and self-assumed leadership.²²

But surely it must be a follow-up of the Synod in our countries to spend more time, energy and material resources in the training of those involved in roles of public leadership. I do not believe that we in church circles have done enough. And so we can have the very sad and very blunt judgement passed in the Synod *Message* about the consequences of such a failure:

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

¹⁹ *Message*, #22

²⁰ *Message*, #19

²¹ *Message*, #5

²² See, for example, New York Times, “Repent or Resign, Bishops Tell African Politicians,” 24 October, p. A4.

By contrast, the *Message* speaks of the need for “saintly politicians and heads of state” who would truly and selflessly serve their people. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania is cited as such an example. Whether or not one agrees with his politics and economics, his personal life of dedication, honesty and simplicity is certainly a model of the need for

... saints in high political office... who will clean the continent of corruption, work for the good of the people, and know how to galvanise other men and women of good will from outside the Church to join hands against the common evils that beset our nations.²⁴

This is certainly a challenge for our Church in Africa: how do we train, encourage and support “saintly politicians,” or simply good public leadership, in our own local situations?

Women

Of the approximately 250 delegates and others who sat in the Synod Hall, about 25 were women. Ten percent is not very good representation of our Church, especially since only a few were allowed to speak and none were allowed to vote!

But one woman delegate, a religious sister from Ghana, did speak during the first week and brought some laughter and sustained applause when she concluded her challenging remarks with the recommendation that the bishops spend two minutes before going to bed that night simply imagining what the Church in Africa would be like if it lacked any women members! Her sentiments were echoed in many very strong interventions that addressed the status of the women in Church and society, interventions by men as well as women.

For example, Archbishop Telesphore Mpundu of Lusaka noted strongly:

... the dignity of women, their giftedness to humanity, their potential massive huge contribution to the Church but that their charisma not being adequately recognised, sufficiently utilised and celebrated. So, we as society and especially as Church are much less of what we might or ought to be.

The Archbishop urged structures of responsibility for women be put in place to benefit both Church and society.

Another Zambian, Sister Mary Ann Katiti, Mother Provincial of the Kasisi Sisters, stated: “Speaking as an African and a Zambian in particular, I feel women have no real voice when it comes to their places and rights and their contributions to the task of evangelisation.” She went on to note the challenge posed by problems suffered by women in particular and the specific contributions women can and do make to Church and society at large. She concluded by saying, “Women religious and women laity in Africa will judge the outcome of our Synod on Reconciliation, Justice and Peace by how practically and boldly we respond to this challenge.”

Well, how practical and bold will be the response might be hinted at by noting these words in the *Message*:

The specific contribution of women, not only in the home as wife and mother but also in the social sphere should be more generally acknowledged and promoted. The Synod

²³Message, #23.

²⁴Message, #23

recommends to our local Churches to... put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women "at appropriate level."²⁵

And one of the *Propositions* calls for "the greater integration of women into Church structures and decision-making processes" while pointing to the injustices done to women every day.²⁶

But will words move to actions, good sentiments to strong commitments? This will require that more Church members – including men – become involved in some sensitisation and advocacy, monitoring and evaluation. Indeed, men must be included in the process since they remain central to the decision making positions.

HIV and AIDS

The Synod's focus on reconciliation, justice and peace would indeed be impracticable if it did not address the Church's response to the pandemic of HIV and AIDS. My own impression is that the outcome of the deliberations produced a very sensitive and realistic direction – one that should be followed in churches and wider society alike. The *Propositions* state clearly that HIV and AIDS

... is not to be looked at as either a medical-pharmaceutical problem or solely as an issue of a change in human behaviour. It is truly an issue of integral development and justice, which requires a holistic approach and response by the Church.²⁷

On the controversial issue of promotion of condoms, the *Message* simply repeats the factual warning that the problem of spread of HIV "cannot be overcome by the distribution of prophylactics." (The key word there, in my opinion, is "overcome.") And fidelity and abstinence are upheld as both desirable and achievable prevention methods.²⁸

But it is in the carefully nuanced statement in the *Propositions* on the problem of discordant couples that in my opinion the Synod delegates significantly advanced the church social teaching by urging:

... a pastoral support which helps couples living with an affected spouse 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.²⁹

Other Highlights

In this article, I have been able to highlight only a few of the very significant dimensions of the outcome of the Second African Synod, shown in the published *Message* and the *Propositions*. The dimensions I have pointed to are those I would consider of particular relevance to some immediate follow-up, especially in the country where I live, Zambia.

But let me list here some of the other very important points set forth in the *Propositions*, with the strong suggestion that they be pursued by anyone genuinely interested in the Synod and its directions -- theologically and pastorally -- for the Church in Africa. (The Vatican Press Office publishes all the documents on line.³⁰)

²⁵ *Message*, #25

²⁶ *Propositions*, #47

²⁷ *Proposition*, #51

²⁸ *Message*, #31

²⁹ *Proposition*, #51

³⁰ Go to http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/sinodo_index_en.htm

These would include reconciliation, justice and peace within the church itself; environment and natural resources; consequences of globalisation; peace initiatives; roles of laity, family and youth; small Christian communities; inculturation; migrants and refugees, prisoners and death penalty; roles of priests, seminarians, permanent deacons, professed religious; persons with disabilities; drugs and alcohol abuse; media; politics and elections; economic structures; South-South cooperation; etc.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SYNOD

Someone remarked to me during the course of the Synod that if all problems could be solved by words, then all problems of Africa would have been solved – a long time ago! So it surely is essential that we move from words to actions, from messages to deeds, from propositions to plans.

In the forward movement, it will be important to maintain a good balance in the Church's mission. Guiding that balance, Pope Benedict offered a wise concluding remark to the Synod delegates at the close of the meeting in Rome.³¹ He cautioned them – and all of us throughout Africa eager to implement the Synod – to avoid two dangers connected with the theme of reconciliation, justice and peace. The first would be the temptation to ignore the fact that action upon this very political theme – rightly so, a political theme – requires a spiritual dimension both profound and fundamental. We must avoid politicising the theme, “talking less about pastors and more about politicians.” But we also must reject the second temptation, “pulling oneself in a purely spiritual world, in an abstract and beautiful world, but not a realistic one.” We must touch upon reality, in a concrete fashion, while maintaining a perspective of God and God's word.

It seems to me that the challenge is to avoid over-politicisation and under-spiritualisation on the one hand, and over-spiritualisation and under-politicisation on the other hand. Indeed a very great challenge!

Another wise remark came from Pope Benedict during his homily at the opening Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on 04 October. In a particularly beautiful phrase, he remarked that “Africa represents an enormous spiritual ‘lung’ for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope.” I take that to refer to the basic religious sensibility of the African people, the spiritual sense of “ubuntu,” the cultural values of community and hospitality -- these are but a few of the elements that give vital breath to the Continent even today.

Yet the Pope went on to caution against what he termed “two dangerous pathologies” that could cause illness in this essential African “lung.” The first was the “spiritual toxic waste” exported from the First World, a “practical materialism, combined with relativist and nihilist thinking.” The second was a “virus” of “religious fundamentalism, mixed together with political and economic interests” that promoted intolerance and violence.

Surely a challenge in moving forward with the Synod will be to take seriously the danger of succumbing to these “two dangerous pathologies.” This is a task of both theologians and practitioners. It should be high on the agenda of the research, workshops, educational programmes and planning that will follow in the months ahead. It is logical to expect that this challenge will be addressed more thoroughly in the Letter of the Pope (*Apostolic Exhortation*) that will come to move the implementation phase forward.

³¹Holy See Press Office, African Synod, *Bulletin* #34, 25 October 2009

To end this article on a more personal note, I mentioned at the outset that I had experienced some “fresh inspiration and encouragement” from the Synod process. For me this was a result of participating in the Synod meeting and subsequently spending time carefully studying the documents.

One strong source of the encouragement is that I felt the work of faith and justice which is central to the mission of the Society of Jesus here in Africa (and, of course, worldwide) has been once again strongly legitimated and vindicated. Moreover, the research, education and advocacy of the institution I work with in Zambia, the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR), has surely been validated and supported. And the Church in Africa, in service to reconciliation, justice and peace is clearly on the right course.

We often hear these days in Zambia that the Church should pull back behind the altar and not comment on political matters, not engage in social struggles, not be so concerned about economic justice issues. Well, I believe it is fair to say that those who feel that way about the Church and its mission are in for even greater shock and disappointment as the implementation of the Second Africa Synod goes forward in on this Continent, truly inspired and encouraged!

The Synod process is not, to be honest, very *radical* in orientation and call. The documents received during the process are, like the majority of CST documents, often very general in description, lacking the bite of good social analysis that goes deeper into issues. And something that is missing in the documents is a strong emphasis on the “option for the poor,” something so central to contemporary CST. This option is the guide for thought and action that is authentically related to the mission of Jesus Christ. In a recent book³², the El Salvadorian liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino, S.J., challenges us who would work for social justice – reconciliation, justice and peace in Synod terms – to be closer to the poor in the necessary process of transformation that we, as followers of Jesus, must be more authentically involved with.

That call for the Church to be more closely with the poor here in Africa may be the essential formula for implementation of the Second African Synod.

³²Jon Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle: No Salvation Outside the Poor -- A Utopian-Prophetic Essay*, London: Dartman, Longman and Tood, 2008

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