

OVERVIEW OF AFCAST AND PREPARATION FOR AFRICAN SYNOD

1. “The joys and hopes....” Who among us Catholics has not heard that powerful line and been motivated, inspired, guided, sustained in our commitment to building a better society in Africa, to transforming the structures toward greater justice, to cooperating with the Lord Jesus in the coming of his Kingdom?
2. That quote is but one of many that is used again and again in summing up what goes by the name of Church’s Social Teaching – CST. Recall lines like: “Action on behalf of justice...” or “Development is the movement from less human conditions...” or “Development is the new name for peace...” or
3. But the danger of quoting lines like these is that it narrows the focus of CST to only magisterial documents, statements from popes and bishops and councils and synods. To be more holistic we need to first of all describe this CST and then ask where it is found.
4. What is it?
 - Body of social wisdom
 - Instructs about human person in society
 - Presents values, structures, practices
 - Contributes to full human life
 - Founded on Word of God
 - Develops through “reading signs of times”
5. And where is it found? In scripture, theological reflection, official teachings, Christian witness. With themes of human dignity, rights and duties, community and solidarity, option for the poor, gender equity, integrity of creation, participation, integral development, etc.
6. Why is it?
 - *Guide* individual consciences about moral/ethical aspects of social issues – e.g., racism, sexism (**personal**)
 - *Form* role of church in social order: announce, denounce, promote – e.g., on economic policies, politics and human rights (**ecclesial**)
 - *Influence* structures of society: provide norms (option for poor), offer recommendations (cancel debt), endorse movements (Jubilee) (**societal**)
7. Now to become specific – several of us who were teaching the CST in seminaries, using the CST in public advocacy campaigns for justice, advising Bishops’ conferences for pastoral letters disseminating CST, serving as Bishops in countries experiencing serious social issues, felt the need to cooperate together to face two obvious facts: *first*, too many of the structures of society, national and international, that were affecting the lives of people in our countries were not being influenced by the wisdom of CST; and *second*, too many of the Christians who should know better, clerical and religious and hierarchical and laity, were woefully ignorant of the wisdom of CST and its application to the practical political, economic, cultural, social and religious life of the people.
8. This group of people, many of whom were friends and colleagues in other networks and situations, got together in 1999 to form the African Forum for Catholic Social Teaching (AFCAST). From the start, we saw the CST as a significant contribution, a value-added dimension, to the public policy debates and decisions. We were not primarily interested in academic discussions or scholarly treatises – though obviously we would benefit from both. Rather, our conviction was practical and political, contextualised and concrete.

9. Our AFCAST vision statement and mission statement sums up this conviction. *Vision*: “Envisioning a more just, peaceful and humane African society that is guided by Catholic Social Teaching and where Gospel values are promoted and celebrated.” *Mission*: “We are an African Forum for Catholic Social Teaching that strives to popularize and contextualise this teaching by supporting and strengthening the capacity of those involved in developing and implementing it at all levels of the church and society.”

10. Simply put, AFCAST is a structure and a process and a focus and an output that believes the CST should not be our church’s “best kept secret” but should be part and parcel of the evangelisation of the church, of the sharing of the Good News of Jesus who proclaimed: “I have come that you might have life and have life to the fullest!”

11. Our *structure* is simple: a working group a dozen or so from southern and eastern Africa and a secretariat in Harare at Arrupe College, the Jesuit philosophical school associated with the University of Zimbabwe. Our *process* is dynamic: meeting twice a year in various countries for a business session and a public forum or seminar on a particular topic of significant interest. Our *focus* is relevant, on issues such as governance, poverty, gender, integrity of creation, corruption, land, etc. Our *output* is useful: maintenance of a good resource library and a helpful website and newsletter, publication of our seminars, preparation of seminary guidelines for teaching CST.

12. We of AFCAST believe that CST is a tremendous help to answer the powerful question posed by a bishop from West Africa during the First African Synod: “Church of Africa, what must you do to be more relevant, more credible?” *Relevant* by touching the real lives of the people, *credible* by practicing what it preaches, learning to walk the talk.

13. Mentioning the First African Synod (1994) now brings me briefly to speak of preparation for the Second African Synod (2009), the topic for this AFCAST public forum here in Kampala. Many of us remember the excitement of the First Synod and its theme of “Evangelisation: You Shall Be My Witnesses.” The five themes that came out from the month’s discussion: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation, justice and peace, communication. It was particularly the justice and peace theme that “dominated” the Synod discussions. Understandable, since the Synod met during the month of April which began with the tragedy of genocide in Rwanda and ended with the glory of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration in South Africa.

14. Has the implementation of the Synod lived up to the hopes stirred by the Synod documents and by John Paul II’s *Ecclesia in Africa*? That has been a topic much analysed and written about recently and should be the burning focus and pertinent recommendations of our discussions here today. (See AFCAST introductory paper for this seminar. For our particular interest is in the CST relevance to the theme of the Second Synod: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Mt 5, 13-14).

15. Certainly the Lineamenta document that came from Rome almost two years ago pointed to a serious preparation of the Second Synod that would take up this most important theme. How has the Lineamenta been received? You would know how to answer that question from your own experiences, here in Uganda, and in the many other countries represented in this AFCAST conference. Let me mention just two articles that challenged me: the first by Laurenti Magesa, Tanzania theologian who played an important role in the First Synod. In an article in NEW PEOPLE he celebrated the CST focus of the Lineamenta’s schema and questions. He saw the document as having a strong potential for moving forward a most

necessary agenda of effective engagement of the African Church in the “joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties” of the people of this beautiful but troubled continent.

16. The second article is by a Nigerian theologian, Raymond Olusesan Aina, writing in the most recent issue of AFER. He is sharply critical of the heavily Roman origin and orientation of the Lineamenta and its sidestepping of many key issues facing the Church on the ground here in Africa – especially the connections between justice and the violence of wars. He also comments on how seriously we should take a document whose only remark about AIDS is that it poses “a worrisome situation” in Africa (#8) but says nothing more! I know how seriously we take AIDS in Zambia, not primarily as a medical-pharmaceutical issue or a behaviour change issue but primarily as a justice issue, a development issue. (But that is another paper!)

17. I leave it to you to read the article and to evaluate its accuracy and appropriateness. But I do say that he challenged me to ask whether we will sufficiently prepare for a Synod that promotes a Church that is relevant and credible. And that, of course, is where AFCAST and this seminar here in Kampala have importance. Has our CST spoken to a context described in the Lineamenta (# 14, 16) as marked by the arms trade, fratricidal and civil wars, political and ethnic tensions, tribalism, low literacy rates, bad governance, corruption, unjust trade practices, excessive conditions imposed by structural adjustment programmes, exploitation, unjust salaries and imbalanced contracts, etc., etc.? You can add other topics to that list. But at our JCTR in Zambia we always remind ourselves that in our country, so rich in physical resources but so poor in people’s lives, “the potentials outweigh the problems.” The challenge, of course, is to apply those potentials to those problems!

18. In maximising those potentials, our Church has a tremendous resource in our social teaching. We will be hearing more about that in the presentations and discussions that follow today in our AFCAST seminar. So I will only conclude my introductory comment by paraphrasing some remarks made by John Bonaventure Kwofie, a Spiritan missionary, who has written about the insistence of the Lineamenta on the importance of educating the laity. He notes that the sub-title of the Synod that mentions “The Salt of the Earth”, raises up the role lay persons can play especially “in those places where only a lay person is able to render the Church present”. He notes that the First Synod focused a call to Catholics in public life (professionals or teachers, business people or civil servants, law enforcement agents or politicians), to give witness to their faith (EA # 108). Indeed, the good governance so necessary to actualise Africa’s potentials is the responsibility of all sectors of society, but it requires the formation of a healthy political and moral conscience to execute it.

19. The author goes on the note that the need for the formation of “a group of Catholics” or “competent Catholics”, people who are faithful to Christ and highly committed to society. In his view, and I would echo his opinion, this is a necessary condition for good governance. The Lineamenta invites the local Churches to set up structures of formation where the laity will be made aware of their responsibility in economic and political life and will be equipped with the necessary intellectual tools to protect and promote their civic, political and social rights (# 66). It also calls on the Church in Africa to find ways and means to encourage “honest politicians who are determined to protect the common patrimony from all forms of waste and embezzlement” (# 15). In many ways this invitation re-echoes the plea of the first Synod for “holy politicians and saintly Heads of State who profoundly love their own people and wish to serve rather than be served” (EA # 111).

20. So I conclude my introductory remarks by noting the challenge before all of us if the Second African Synod is to bear the fruit that we all hope and pray for. AFCAST sees the

CST as central to the evangelisation that includes reconciliation, peace and justice. During our day here, then, let us ask ourselves three questions:

1. Do we see priorities for the next African Synod, based on the CST, that are not sufficiently developed in the Lineamenta?
2. Do we see opportunities for influencing the direction that the Synod will take, by sensitising our bishops as well as the larger Christian community?
3. Do we commit ourselves to the formation of the laity that is so necessary for any genuine reconciliation, peace and justice?

In responding to these questions, let us be honest, courageous and hopeful. Above all, hopeful. I recall the admonition of Paul VI who remarked that those who best contribute to the present are those who give hope for the future.

May we be hopeful in our engagement with the Second African Synod!

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