

EVANGELISATION AND THE SECOND AFRICAN SYNOD

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“So what did the Second African Synod say about evangelisation, or was it only about peace and justice issues?” That was the good question put to me when I returned to Lusaka from a month in Rome, where I was part of the advisory team for the AMECEA bishops.

The question probably arose because the First African Synod, meeting in 1994, had taken “evangelisation” as its main theme. But this recent one focused on “reconciliation, justice and peace.” Did this mean a forgetting or a side-lining of the central mission of the Church, an evangelical mission of sharing the Good News?

Well, there certainly was no putting of evangelisation in second place during the just ended Synod, that’s for sure! Although the word “evangelisation” is mentioned only once in the *Message* that came at the close of the Synod on 24 October, the concept clearly is central to the tone and emphasis of the *Message*. In Part IV, Numbers 14 to 28, the task of the Church is spelled out to the various actors, from bishops, priests, laity, religious and public leaders, to families, women, men, youth and children. All have a part of play in sharing the Good News of reconciliation, justice and peace.

And the *Propositions*, the second basic document to come from the Synod, makes very clear in Number 34 what the task of evangelisation is:

The Synod Fathers highlight the urgency and necessity of evangelisation which is the mission and, indeed, the very identity of the Church (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). The Synod Fathers emphasize that this evangelisation essentially consists in bearing witness to Christ in the power of the Spirit through life and then by word (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21), in a spirit of openness to others, respect and dialogue with them, concerning Gospel values. This synod calls upon the Church-Family of God in Africa to be a witness in service to reconciliation, justice and peace, as “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.”

This task of evangelisation is explicitly mentioned in several other places in the *Propositions*. Number 18 promotes use of *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (the important volume summarising key parts of the church social teaching) in the task of evangelising. In speaking of families in Number 38, local churches are reminded to help spouses in their duty (even referred to as a “ministry”) of evangelising. And as would be expected, in discussing the media, Number 56 emphasises that “communication is a priority for human development and evangelisation.”

It seems to me that there are three clear reasons why a Synod called to strengthen “the Church in Africa at the service to reconciliation, justice and peace” (the official theme of the Second Special Assembly of Bishops for Africa) would emphasise evangelisation. First, it is the teaching of Church that the message of justice and peace is central to evangelisation. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) explicitly states:

29. But evangelisation would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social. This is why evangelisation involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realised, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible,

about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development -- a message especially energetic today about liberation.

Second, the various topics taken up in the Synod are all elements of integral Good News. For instance, let me mention just a few: that the dignity and participation of women in Church and society should be enhanced, that the message of holistic care of persons with HIV and AIDS should be promoted, that persons in positions of public leadership should be formed in the church social teaching, that the role of youth as agents of positive social change should be encouraged, and that a new and just world order should be advanced. Evangelisation includes all of this and more.

Third, the experience of the Synod was one of enhancement of the elements necessary for effective evangelisation to take place. That is how I would interpret the expression in the opening paragraph of the Message (#1), where the delegates expressed that the Synod provided 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.

"Fresh inspiration and encouragement" was indeed the experience of us who were privileged to engage in the three weeks of the Second African Synod. Sharing that inspiration and encouragement with the people of this blessed Continent as a Church in the service of reconciliation, justice and peace will certainly be a very relevant task of evangelisation

This is certainly what was in the mind and heart of Pope Benedict XVI (who inspired and encouraged us all by sitting through most of the general sessions of the Synod) when he remarked in his homily at the closing Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on 25 October that "The reconciled Church is a powerful leaven of reconciliation in single countries and in the whole African continent." He exhorted the African Bishops who had participated in the Assembly: "Start down the road of new evangelisation with the courage that comes from the Holy Spirit."

[903 words]

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