

## Why is Africa important for the USA?

About 20 years ago, after living in Africa only a short time, I was returning to the USA for a brief visit. The Jesuit who was driving me to the airport asked what I would be speaking about to various audiences. I told him Africa, its past, present and future. He simply and bluntly said to me: "Tell them that the future of the world depends on the future of Africa!" Well, I pondered and responded, what could such a sweeping statement possibly mean? "Think about it, pray about it, say about it!" was his answer. Well, I've done that over the years, and tonight I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to share some brief reflections with you in response to the question in the title of my presentation, "Why is Africa important for the USA?"

I do believe that my friend's simple and blunt remark to me almost 20 years ago is still very true, and I hope to demonstrate that to you by the end of my presentation this evening. I do genuinely believe the truth— and I try to live that truth in my social and educational and pastoral work in Zambia – that the future of the world does indeed depend on Africa.

It is a truth I thought of again in preparing this presentation, as I was completing a very wonderful book – and a very large book, almost 600 pages -- published last year, simply called AFRICA, with the subtitle, *Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*. The author is Richard Dowden, a British journalist who has lived in and traveled around Africa for over thirty years. His is a love-hate relationship with the Continent -- for example, he offers an extremely sharp critique of Zimbabwe's Mugabe and Zaire's Mubutu, along with a delightful praise of Botswana and Ghana. But I was very much struck by his opening paragraph in the very last chapter of his long book, entitled "The New Africa." He writes:

Africa: where humans emerged some 4 million years ago. From where, some 100,000 years ago, Homo Sapiens spread all over the world. Africa: the mother of us all. It is our past. Could it also be our future?

Dowden mentions a fact that I had heard repeated several times last October, when I participated in Rome in the Second African Synod – a gathering of some 200 Catholic bishops from throughout Africa, joined by another 50 persons, a mix of bishops, laity and religious. The meeting had as its theme, "The Church in Africa in Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." The fact repeated was that civilisation began on the African Continent and Africa has a lot to contribute to that civilisation today. Remember that anthropologists tell us that Adam and Eve were probably South Africans! The final message of the Second African Synod called for a more positive perception of Africa. I quote:

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. (Message, #6)

But what is Africa? Should we not really speak of "Africas" in the plural? Such a huge Continent, comprising over 700 million people living in over 50 countries. When I was travelling from Zambia last week to come to the USA to offer presentations like the one I am offering this evening, I looked at the small map on the TV in front of me at my seat. Africa, such a huge Continent – you could fit the mainland USA into it three times and still have some space left over! It took over six hours of very fast air travel to cover only two-thirds of the Continent. And such a wondrous variety of life below me!

Often when I am speaking in the States, I ask my audience what is the first image that comes to them when I say, "I am from Africa." So for you here this evening, I ask, what words, what pictures come to you? Ah yes: hunger, poverty, conflict, HIV and AIDS, floods and drought, ignorance. Ah, yes, so sad, so very sad!

But my friends, that is not Africa! I repeat, that is not Africa! No more than if I told you that the USA is the land of inequality, bigotry, militarism, racism, economic collapse, financial frauds, unemployment, etc., etc.

I come from Zambia. I would not ask you all to identify my home on a map – many of you might think of Gambia, or Zimbabwe, or Nigeria or Kenya. But Zambia is in central southern Africa, one of the richest countries in Africa in terms of resources: land, agriculture, minerals, tourist sites, and peace. Yes, peace -- 46 years of Independence with 73 tribes living together without ethnic conflict.

We are the envy of our neighbours! Neighbours like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where over four million have died in the past decade in conflicts that are local but largely are international, fighting over its immensely rich minerals; or Zimbabwe, where a previously rich economy has suffered a melt-down because of the megalomaniac stance of its aged President; or South Africa, which will host the World Cup next June – where real "football" is played – soccer!

Yes, Zambia, such a rich country. But with some of the poorest people in the world! The United Nations *Human Development Index* (HDI), ranks us 166 out of 177 countries, according to measures such as life expectancy (just over 40 years for Zambians), literacy (especially low among women), and meeting basic needs (so unequally distributed in our rich country).

In the research, education and advocacy programmes of our Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR), we speak of Zambia as a country of great potentials and great problems. But we seriously believe that *the potentials outweigh the problems!* The task, then, is to get those potentials applied to those problems. We call that equitable, integral and sustainable development!

But not let me return to the topic of this evening's presentation: Why is Africa Important for the USA? Let me suggest several points for us to ponder.

First, we probably need to be honest and acknowledge that the USA is only a minor actor in Africa, and that the overall focus of USA policy in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – governmental, civil society (NGOs) and church interests and policies – has been more on Latin America and the elements of the Cold War. Today the most important country active in Africa is China, a major actor in that new economic power formation called the "BRICS" – Brazil, Russia, India and China. China is a world power of great influence and its influence in investment, trade, and other economic ties is strongly felt in Africa. I can tell many stories of that reality in Zambia!

So should the USA simply leave interest and involvement in Africa to the Chinese? Obviously not, not only for the good of Africa but also for the good of the USA! Listen to some other points that we need to pay attention to.

Second, Africa is a Continent rich in resources of land, minerals, oil. For its own economic health, the USA needs to relate well with Africa in terms of investment and trade. Oil, of course, plays a major role in the USA economy and African suppliers now and in the future

will be key in that role. Again, the potentials for good economic relationships— good in the sense of equitable, profitable and sustainable – exist on an immense scale.

Third, the conflicts and turmoils and extremisms that all too often embroil African states obviously have consequences outside of the Continent. There is a dangerous ripple effect. Organised “terrorism” is a contemporary fact that we cannot ignore. It did not take A Nigerian visitor to the USA on Christmas Day with something very dangerous hidden in his underpants to remind us of that I’m not sure how many of you might have experienced the extra security checks at USA airports if you are arriving from an African destination. I have stories to tell about that!

However I must be honest and tell you that I believe that the much of the current USA government response to this situation is neither correct nor effective. I mean the concentration on military responses, reflected, for instance in the build-up of AFRICOM, the USA African Command. It is important to note the concern by many African governments about this increased military interest in Africa, interest that might better be promotive of peace and security if it were oriented toward development aid. There understandable worry about the potential militarisation of USA aid to the continent.

Fourth, there is a growing political power on the international scene represented by the increased cooperation of African states in the AU – African Union. This is the organisation of African states, based in Addis Abba, Ethiopia, with emergent institutions of Parliament, Commission, various courts, economic arrangements, etc. The AU is not yet the EU – European Union – and certainly not yet the USA, United States of Africa. Libya’s Omar Kadafi has recently been pushing hard for that final stage but the majority of African leaders realise that this stage is as of yet too premature.

But the USA should pay attention to this new political phenomenon of greater African unity and its implications, for example, in the restructuring of voting powers in the United Nations or its strength in negotiating forums such as the WTO or the World Bank and IMF.

Fifth, and this is a factor that simply must be paid attention to, no matter how painful for the interests and life-styles of you who live here in the USA. This is the factor of *climate change*. Much has been said about the topic of climate change but I wonder whether you realise what it means for Africa today and tomorrow. Let me quote from a report released just two weeks ago by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union Commission. The report states:

Agricultural output is expected to decrease by 50 per cent in Africa, resulting in severe undernourishment as a result of unchecked climate changes. The health burden and conflicts will increase as populations fight over dwindling resources. The need for Africa to develop adaptation and mitigation strategies cannot be overemphasised. The costs of adaptation and mitigation are, however, extremely high and beyond the means of African countries. It is estimated that the cost of adaptation could be anywhere between 5 and 10 per cent of the continental GDP. It is therefore important for the international community to help in financing the cost of climate change adaptation and mitigation in Africa.

But why, you might ask, should that be of special interest to the USA? For the simple fact that the climate change being experienced in Africa at this moment – and I can tell you stories directly from Zambia – is not caused by the people of Africa. No, it is the lifestyles and industrial patterns of the people of North America, of Europe, and, increasingly of China. Unless you quickly and forcefully address that fact here in the USA, the people of Africa will

suffer because of you. I'm sorry to say that so bluntly, but it is the truth, a physical truth, an economic truth and a moral truth that must be acknowledged and responded to.

Sixth, "a moral truth" – I just used that expression. And that really is the most basic reason for why Africa is important for the USA. This is the moral truth of the oneness of our own humanity. And unless we pay attention to, are linked with, are responsive to, the people of this beautiful Continent of Africa, we are less human. And for those of us for whom Christianity is important, we are less Christian.

What do I mean by these sweeping statements? Let me begin by referring to a very meaningful expression of African wisdom, *ubuntu*. In the Bantu languages, one of which I had to learn for my pastoral work in Zambia, *ubuntu* means humanness in its richest sense. This is expressed in the beautiful African proverb, "I am because we are, and we are because I am." My talents, possibilities, future is so because I belong to a community; and this community's richness, creativity, future is so because it is made up of individuals like me. "Individualism" is out of the question in an authentic African context!

Of course, do not let me be overly romantic or unrealistic – there are plenty of departures from this high moral stance of *ubuntu*! But the basic moral truth is that I am less complete as a human person if I live in a world where others have less of a chance of being fully human, in every sense of the word. Together, we are humans and apart we are not. Another proverb expressing *ubuntu* clearly states: "A person is a person through other persons."

To speak of "being fully human, in every sense of the word" of course directs those of us who are Christians to the words of Jesus himself, "I have come that you might have life and have life to the full" (John 10:10). And it reminds us of the instruction about who would get the tickets to enter the Kingdom of Heaven at the Last Judgement – only those who paid attention to the needs for a fuller life of our sisters and brothers around us (Matthew 25: 31-46).

Finally, let me mention another powerful reason why the USA should pay attention to Africa, especially those of us associated with the Catholic Church in the USA. In a sense, this is related to the previous reason I mentioned, the moral truth. But it is an ecclesial truth pointed to by Pope Benedict XVI during his homily at the opening Mass for the Second African Synod in St. Peter's Basilica on 04 October 2009. In a particularly meaningful phrase, the Pope remarked that "Africa represents an enormous spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope."

Perhaps you in the USA are part of that humanity in a crisis of faith and hope – I leave that to you to make a judgement one way or another. But I take the Pope's reference to a spiritual "lung" to refer to the basic religious sensibility of the African people, the spiritual sense of "ubuntu" that I have already explained, the cultural values of family, community, respect 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 there is a challenge not only for Africa but for the USA, for the wider Western world, to take seriously the danger of succumbing to these “two dangerous pathologies.” Together, we might keep a healthy lung and breathe more humanly, more spiritually, more sustainably.

And so I return to that question posed in the title of my presentation here this evening: “Why Is Africa Important for the USA?” And I remind you of the story I began with, about the lesson told me that “The future of the world depends on the future of Africa.” I hope that you have a bit more appreciation of that truth, have been given something to think about and to pray over. What are its implications for Creighton University faculty, staff and students? For the Church in Omaha and the USA? For the USA Government now under the leadership of a son of Africa?

Let me conclude by focusing for a moment on Creighton University, the host for this evening’s presentation. Creighton University is a Jesuit university. A few years ago, Jesuit international leadership affirmed Africa to be a *priority* for all our Jesuit apostolic concerns. There still is plenty of discussion and debate about what this “priority” might mean. But I suggest that it has something to do with our heads and hearts, and our voices and commitments.

We simply need to understand more about Africa, its history and geography, its contemporary situation, its potentials and problems. There are programmes here at Creighton that specialise in that. But I want to suggest that all of the schools and departments and programmes of Creighton somehow pay some attention to Africa. Surely some ways, sometimes some very simple ways, can be found to do that. I leave it to your own creative imagination and ingenuity!

But there is also need for some voices to be raised regarding the influences on Africa of USA policies, for good and for bad. Trade policies, agricultural subsidy policies, investment policies, debt and aid policies, military policies. If the future of the world depends on the future of Africa, then surely the policies affecting the present and the future of Africa must be of concern to a University whose official mission statement makes very explicit the following:

As a Jesuit university we are continually bringing the richness of a 450 year old educational tradition to bear on the most contemporary issues of our world. Our Jesuit vision commits us to form women and men of competence, conscience and compassion who have learned from reflecting upon their experiences of being for and with others. We do this in service of a faith that does justice.

So it turns out that the way we answer that question posed in the title of my presentation, “Why is Africa Important to the USA?” will really be important to you, the family and community of Creighton University.

I pray that you can respond more readily to that question, and in your response become more truly human and more truly open to the future.

Thank you!

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