

## **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Synod for Africa: What are the challenges for Religious Communities?**

***Proposal for reflection from the African (General) Councillors Association  
l'Association des Conseillers (Généraux) Africains - Rome - to the Synod Fathers<sup>1</sup>.***

### ***The Church Family of God (From the First to the Second Synod)***

N° 21 of the *Instrumentum laboris* rightly raises the point that 'The problems submitted to the Synod Fathers have a great impact on the Christian conscience. Because Christians are also the sons and daughters of given societies, the same problems exist in both society and the Church.' The document continues: 'The Churches in Africa... bear in them the fragility of the present situation of African countries at the institutional, financial, theological cultural and juridical levels.'

Defining the Church as Family of God was probably one of the most meaningful contributions of the First Synod. However, have we assessed its political consequences?

Members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are, to the same extent as all other Christians, sons and daughters of their respective civil societies. The communities they form do not escape the surrounding vulnerability. It seems to be most apparent in community life

### ***Reconciliation, justice and ad intra proclamation of peace***

In reference to its service to reconciliation, justice and peace, the *Instrumentum laboris* concentrates on the way the message of the Gospel can transform culture or civil society. It invites the Church in Africa not to withdraw into itself, but to play a prophetic role in the social and political life of the continent, [N°4]. Given that the transformation of civil society is paramount in achieving the Church's mission, an examination of conscience would be expected on the part of the Church. The *Instrumentum laboris* is silent on internal ecclesiastical problems, problems between communities or within the one community. While feeling concerned for the plank we see in the eye of civil society, let us not forget the one that is in ours.

In short, we should also ask ourselves how these issues of reconciliation, justice and peace are experienced in our own Church. We should look for the means whereby the Church can be a sign of reconciliation, justice and peace in its own sphere. As Christians, we form part of civil society, but how can we work at unity among the members of civil society when we are not living that unity within our own communities? Our practice of reconciliation, justice and peace has to become a communicable testimony for civil society. In this way, we shall become the salt giving taste to the world and the light illuminating it.

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<sup>1</sup> L'Association des Conseillers (Généraux) Africains – African (General) Councillors Association (A.C.A.) - Rome - is composed of over sixty Religious and Sisters belonging to various Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life with their Generalate Offices in Rome.

### ***Religious as prophetic voice or sign***

Concerning members of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life the *Instrumentum laboris* states, 'Through their proper charisms and specific involvement in the Church, these institutes and societies work to extend the Kingdom of Christ's justice, peace and love through pastoral work with youth (schools, street ministry, etc.), assistance to the poor, services to women (particularly widows) and care of the sick and physically challenged' (n° 113)

In more particular reference to consecrated women, the *Instrumentum laboris* considers the response to the challenges of reconciliation, justice and peace through closeness seems better served by feminine attributes. It is also largely through women and with women as principal co-workers in the evangelising mission that we should seek new responses to suffering in our African societies.

All this can be borne out in the field of the apostolate, among people to whom Religious are sent. Nevertheless, it appears that in their communities and Congregations, many of them confront major problems in issues of justice and reconciliation. However, our communities have as mission to challenge Africa in showing it that a life of reconciliation through justice and peace is possible through respect for our differences of every kind. Africa needs women and men deeply rooted in God and whose faith will not easily be shaken by political and ethnic divisions that undermine its most basic foundations, namely, respect for life, solidarity and hospitality. As for us men and women Religious, it is up to us to bear testimony to everyone of our unity, so as to root out the scourge of tribalism or regionalism from which our countries suffer so much and which engender division and power struggles in our communities. This scourge is in blatant contradiction of the Gospel we profess and to which we wish to conform our lives.

### ***Towards greater understanding of our differences in view of bearing witness***

Eric Law, a Chinese immigrant to the USA aged 14, is an Episcopalian pastor there who developed a Christian approach to the problem of intercultural existence. According to him, culture is not limited to ethnic group or race, even if these two aspects are the most prominent in constituting it. Differences linked to age, physical aptitudes, education, skills, family structure, employment, individual interests, personal experiences, etc., all these are culture too.

The symbol of the iceberg is very apt as a help in understanding cultures and deciphering certain behaviours. Indeed, just like the iceberg, we only see a small part of the culture, the way of behaving on the surface; the greater and most meaningful part is submerged.

In this sense, we have lots to learn if we wish to build witnessing communities based on Gospel values. Working on the submerged portion of culture is indispensable for understanding self, understanding others and helping one another to bring our contribution to the life of our Institutes and Congregations and their specific mission.

### ***Reconciliation and healing***

The issue of reconciliation and healing needs to be better studied, thought out and developed in our Christian or Religious communities. Indeed, in the area of reconciliation and healing, the approach of the New Religious Movements and Independent African Churches is having such a great influence on Catholics that they are leaving the traditional Christian Churches en masse.

The Church in Africa has to reflect more on its understanding of healing and the means it proposes to its pastoral agents in helping the faithful. Indeed, our Church needs healing, not only physically, but also spiritual and psychological, from the diverse forms of injury and violence it suffers.

### ***The role of the Word of God in the move towards reconciliation, peace and justice***

The role of the Word of God in the Church's life is fundamental. Much effort has been made to make the Word accessible to all the faithful. We must maintain this effort so that it may bear greater fruit. In our days, we see the proliferation of sects and movements that are based on a Word of God that is not always well interpreted and is aimed at criticising and confusing our faithful. The challenge of reconciliation, justice and peace can only be taken up if we go to the source from which we draw our strength: the Word of God. For this reason, we propose to the Synod Fathers to lay particular emphasis on the Word of God in our journey towards reconciliation, justice and peace.

We propose the reinforcing of efforts in the Bible Apostolate to help our faithful not only to have access to the Word, but also to know how to read it, share it and live it. Efforts expended to organise Bible study and sharing groups need the support of our bishops and pastors in parishes and other Church structures.

For this to become a reality, we need to increase the possibilities in training sessions for ministers of the Word. This training will equip them with the tools necessary to promote such an essential apostolate in our Church today. The creating of study and sharing groups at parish level and in families is the way to make better known the major resource the Lord left us in his Word.

### ***The Word of God and Interreligious Dialogue***

Knowing the Word of God better places us in an appropriate situation for dialogue, not only with members of sects and movement that seek to confuse our faithful, but it also gives us the tools for dialogue with believers of other religions. Indeed, an adult faith, founded on the Word of God and the doctrine of the Church is the basis for our dialogue with the faithful of other religions. In Africa, we need to dialogue more with followers of Traditional Religion and Islam.

Communities of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life can lend a significant hand in this effort. Often from various horizons, gathered together by Christ and living together without having chosen one another, the members of these communities already have within them the right seeds to promote the emergence of interreligious dialogue.

In interreligious dialogue, there is also an opportunity to work together. We are witnesses to efforts already being made in this direction and we request the Synod Fathers to lend support to these efforts for the well-being of our brothers and sisters on the continent. By understanding one another as believers in the one God, we will see that we have shared desires and that on the human plane, we can work together.

One of the areas where we are called to cooperate with followers of other religions is in creating a sustainable peace based on justice, forgiveness and reconciliation.

### ***Passing from domination to a genuine partnership***

Very often, many people harbour negative ideas about the continent and some are even convinced that nothing good can come from Africa. If Africa is to emerge from this negativism, the Church has to give it hope. It must not remain the continent of misery, pitied by the world. Africa has to make itself heard by the rest of the world and by all those who have the power of decision. Our cry has to reach to the end of the road and make understood that the time for sympathy for Africa is over; today, more than ever, we must push justice and equality for all men and women.

It is up to all of us to work to change the image of Africa. All of us, Africans and non-Africans need to change our mentality and our attitude towards Africa. Non-Africans should look beyond its poverty, diseases, and underdevelopment. They should begin to appreciate its efforts towards liberation and its demand to be treated justly on the international scene.

Africans, in general, do not wish to be considered as beggars; they claim what their efforts and labour demand in terms of justice. A change of attitude would mean appreciating the gracefulness of Africans and not just their burden; their elegance and not their underdevelopment; their gifts and not only their tasks; their challenges and not only their problems and difficulties. The Church in Africa is able to create an environment enabling such a change of mentality by Africans themselves, as well as non-Africans.

(Translated from French by Fr. Donald MacLeod, M.Afr.)

# *Immigration, Discrimination and Social Justice*

(proposition by A.C.A.)<sup>2</sup>

*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. (Mat 5: 13 – 14)

This is the quotation cited for the theme of the Special Synod on Africa. One of the biggest challenges facing the Church, now and into the future, as it has always been, is the exteriorisation or personalisation of the Word of God. Jesus' injunction on this is all too clear: *Now that you know the truth, happy will you be if you put it into practice.* (John 13: 17) From the Gospel of Luke, we read about Jesus telling a parable to his disciples: *Can one blind person guide another blind person? . . . Why do you observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the great log in your own?* (Luke 6: 39 – 41)

As a Church, we can no longer brush aside and pretend that we are not aware of the injustices that prevail in our world and especially against Africa and Africans. True reconciliation will not happen unless the root causes of the problems of Africa are addressed. Poverty has driven many young people to emigrate from the continent. Many have perished in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. We will never know whether the boats capsized or **were** capsized. The immigration laws in the West are very detrimental to Africans, to the extent that everywhere Africans are always treated with suspicion of either being terrorists or drug pushers. The profiling is only the colour of the skin. How are we to become agents of reconciliation in *building a Universal Brotherhood and Sisterhood*, (*Instrumentum Laboris*, Chapter II: II #3, p.34) when the other sees the African only as a vampire ready to drain life's blood, and not as a child of God?

While it is true that economic considerations aggravate the influx of immigrants from the African continent, it has become assumed as the only motivation for emigration. Thus, every African seen on the streets in the West is taken for an *unwanted immigrant* and subjected to inhuman conditions. Here in Italy and Rome in particular, there are many African men and women Religious serving the Church as members of their General Administrations, as *ambassadors for Christ* from their respective Congregations and countries, on behalf of the Universal Church. Yet these people are basically lumped together with the category of *unwanted immigrants*, and subjected to the inhumane treatment generally meted out to the people of the Continent. The process of visa application and procuring a resident permit is not only expensive, but laborious and time-consuming; in many instances, it hampers the effectiveness of their ministry. The Church in Africa is clearly contributing to the growth of the Church Universal. In order to further this contribution, a welcoming setting has to be fostered. It is important that Church leaders in Africa and in the West team up and speak out against this discrimination and look for ways of improving the situation. We have truly embraced the Word of God and are now the new wave of missionaries for the Church, an oasis in the desert. *The Lord hears the cry of the poor!*

Why is air travel on the continent so expensive? It is much cheaper to hop on the plane and travel from any part of Africa to Europe or North America than to travel across the

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continent. All the major airlines are ready and delighted to sell credit card tickets online intended for travel to the Western World. Yet when the destination happens to be in Africa, red flags go up. It is the same credit card registered to the buyer and has been used for prior transactions. The holder of the card and the issuing bank remain the same, but the destination is Africa! We are at their mercy. *The Lord hears the cry of the poor!*

Our economic woes have been perpetrated by these same countries. The wars in Africa are a real drain because to keep up with technical warfare, we need highly sophisticated weapons which come from producers in these countries and with a high price tag. When we have no money for food or for job provision, are we to be made to subsist on arms? We have been exploited and we continue to be exploited. *The Lord hears the cry of the poor!*

We can no longer presume that it is all the fault of Africa and Africans. *No peace without justice, no justice without forgiveness.* (***Instrumentum Laboris***, Chapter II: III #3, p 36) Notwithstanding seventy-times-seven times, we have to question the perpetrating of systemic injustices and discrimination, even when it is within the Church Universal. We will forgive, but we also ask to be recognised as Children of God! *The Lord hears the cry of the poor!*

## Refugees and the Second African Synod

(Proposition by Fr. Peter Balleis, sj., Director du JRS international)<sup>3</sup>

His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his latest encyclical that “every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 62) Among the migrants which the Church in Africa encounters are those who have been forcibly displaced: refugees, asylum seekers, stateless people, internally displaced persons, and other survival migrants. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) tells us that there were nearly 10,500,000 of these people on our continent at the end of 2008. We take note of these people in the *Instrumentum Laboris* saying that they are indicia of “bad management” in the socio-economic sphere (no. 51), of socio-politico abuses of justice (no. 56), and constitute signs which cry out to the Church (nn. 62, 98).

While the reflections on the significance of refugees and migrants found in the *Instrumentum Laboris* are useful, it is also helpful to recall His Holiness’s point: migrants are first of all humans, are part of “us” and not primarily a “them”. Many of the refugees throughout the continent are Catholics. Many are part of the “Church-family of God” which this synod explores. In some diocese on our continent the largest single parish is that found at the refugee camp and many of the bishops among us have had the joyful

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<sup>3</sup> Text prepared upon the request of ACA : Association des Conseillers (Général) Africains – African (General) Councillors Association (A.C.A.) – Rome. It is composed of over sixty Religious and Sisters belonging to various Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life with their Generalate Offices in Rome.

opportunity to celebrate the sacraments with the refugees who are part of “our” people. So when we examine the conditions of refugees in Africa we should not always look at how the States treat them, rather we must often inquire “how are the States treating us?”

To be sure many African refugees are not part of the church: we can think of the hundreds of thousands of Somali who are living in subhuman conditions in Dadaab camp in Kenya, the Sudanese refugees in Tchad, the western Sahara refugees in Algerian and Maltese camps, the majority of these people are muslim. Catholic, Christian, Muslim or Animist, all are children of God. All have human dignity which must be protected and cherished.

Why are we refugees, then? Again the Holy See suggested a response at the end of September when it noted that refugees were the product of “violent political and cultural conflicts, random acts of violence and destruction in the absence of competent and responsible governmental authorities, systematic violation of universally recognized human rights, and failure to respect the life and dignity of the human person.”<sup>4</sup> How are we treated when we flee from these abuses? We are confined to camps in remote regions of our continent, we are denied freedom of movement; we are denied the right to work and so we cannot provide for our families nor ensure more than the most basic education for our children. The governments of most of our host countries want to make sure that we can never become citizens or legal residents of the places we have been forced to call our new homes. Is it any wonder then that local churches often are tempted to view refugees as objects of charity- - as “them”? We in this synod must make sure that when we speak of the Church-Family of God as salt and light, we are speaking of refugees as well and not just about them.

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<sup>4</sup> Statement of the Holy See at the 60<sup>th</sup> Session of the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Geneva, 29 September 2009