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The Church in Africa: What is the Spirit asking?

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1:30 a.m. in Rome. I need some sleep so as to get up in time for Mass at 7:00 a.m. I am one of a group called on to work through the evening and night to produce an English version of the day's proceedings.

9:00 a.m. I continue to be surprised that our document of about 30 pages has been neatly printed and bound by the Vatican Printing Press. This is but one example of the stunning efficiency and attention to detail that characterizes everything here.

I am part of the Second Special Assembly of African Bishops. The working languages of the synod are French, English, Italian and Portuguese. All of us "experts" attend every general session, where we listen attentively and take copious notes. The ideas expressed in our documents eventually become the final propositions which the bishops will vote on by means of electronic voting Yes, No or Abstain.

Sometimes the final edition is a hybrid from ideas originating in one or other of the four language groups. Our group often has difficulty expressing the same ideas with the same clarity in each language.

These propositions, along with other documents presented to the synod, will then go to Pope Benedict to draw up the official Assembly Document.

Small groups

Small group discussions are an essential part of the synod. It is here that ideas circulating in the various reports or at the plenary sessions either get traction through debate and adoption or simply die and are forgotten. The debates have been sometimes heated. But throughout, everyone had as much to say as everyone else. No point of view has been excluded and no person can complain that he or she was not heard.

The end result of these discussions is to draw up propositions to be sent to the General Secretary and his team to harmonize and bring to the General Assembly for debate.

One of the proofs of the soundness of any proposition is the extent to which it contributes to the overall theme of this synod: *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*. People are concerned that the synod not

simply restate ideas that were covered in the first synod on Africa in 1994. This synod calls for new and creative thinking on many issues facing Africa and the Church in Africa today.

Opening Mass

The Synod began with a Mass presided over by the Pope in St Peter's Basilica. In his homily the Pope noted that Africa possessed "a deep sense of God" which made the continent "the repository of an inestimable treasure for the whole world. Africa represents an enormous spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope."

The Pope was quick to warn, however, that this lung can take ill, and that it was at the moment under attack from at least two dangerous viruses: (a) practical materialism: "an illness that the First World continues to export as toxic waste that contaminates the peoples of other continents, in particular those of Africa"; (b) religious fundamentalism, mixed with political and economic interests: "groups who follow various religious creeds are spreading throughout the continent of Africa. They do so in God's name, but teach and practice, not love and respect for freedom, but intolerance and violence."

Down to work

When the work of the synod began in earnest it was obvious that the participants were prepared to give of their best in finding solutions to Africa's problems.

The first task was to identify the various factors that were destabilizing Africa. The second task was for the Church to seek ways to address these, either on its own or, where necessary, with other religious and civic entities in Africa and all around the world.

There was the recognition that Africa's greatest assets are its peoples and that the Church must increase and improve its efforts at harnessing this most important resource. In this regard, the synod spent a considerable amount of time discussing the role of women in society and the importance of a well-educated and well-formed laity as agents of change in African societies.

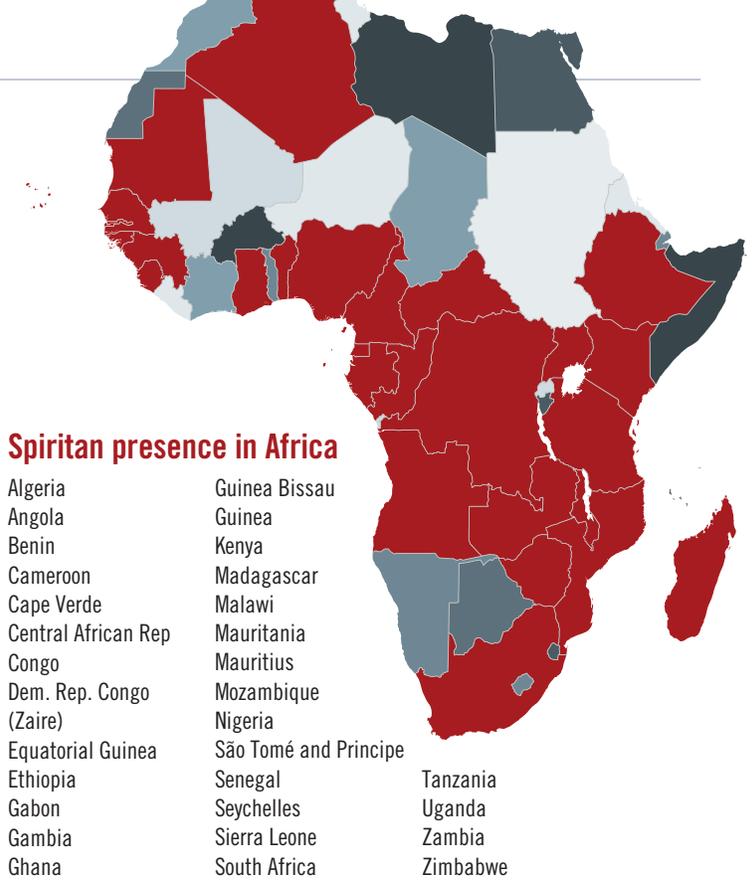
Women, Leadership, Credibility of the Church

Women spoke out very clearly and very loudly at this synod. One of the women speakers invited the participants to do a two-minute exercise before they went to bed: imagine what a church without women would look like.

She was not even speaking on ordination. She was simply arguing that there were things in the Church and society in Africa and elsewhere that structurally incapacitated women and prevented them from rendering full service in the Church and in society as Christians and able citizens. Many participants spoke on this theme: discussions on the treatment of the girl-child, on the question of some marriage customs in Africa which place undue stress on women, on inheritance rights, on widowed women and the treatment they receive. There was also a lot of soul-searching on how to bring women on board in those areas of leadership and governance that are already legal in canon law, and on how to increase theological and other educational opportunities for women in the African church. The question of trafficking of women was also a concern.

The synod recognized that what Chinua Achebe wrote in *The Trouble with Nigeria* is true of the entire continent as well: the trouble with Africa is leadership. The synod spent a lot of energy wondering what the Church could do to help this situation. The recognition was clear: African Catholic and other Christian public servants are often no better stewards of public trust and treasure than others. It was therefore important for the Church to intentionally grow a well-informed laity that would be more conscious of their role as agents of positive change in Africa and effectively work to bring peace, justice and reconciliation all through the continent.

The synod was very aware that, as Paul VI put it long ago, preaching alone does not move people anymore. The world is moved by those who live what they preach. How can the Church be an effective and credible agent of reconciliation justice and peace if it is lacking in these qualities and virtues?



How the Spirit speaks

Whenever I think of the synodal process as I saw it, I find myself thinking about inspiration. Christians believe that scripture is sacred because it is the word of God inspired by the Spirit of God. The same Spirit who spoke through the prophets is still with the Church and guides it in search of the truth. The process is not easy. In fact it can sometimes be downright messy.

After this synod I think I am a bit closer to understanding how the Spirit continues to speak through the prophets. Consider this: From the time the idea of this synod was put out, the Church of God all over Africa and beyond became involved in

A small, peaceful Christian presence

The Archbishop of Niamey, Niger, should have been present at the Synod in Rome. He was unable to attend because he was invited as a key mediator in the conflict between the government and the Tuareg rebels. Niger is a country 98% Muslim, and 1% Christian.

As a small Church, part of an even smaller Christian presence in the Gambia, a predominantly Muslim country, the theme of this Synod is a further challenge for us to become a sign and instrument for bringing about justice, peace, and mutual respect among the various tribal, social and religious factors that constitute the fabric of Gambian society.

The particular way in which we in Africa can witness to this call, at this moment in its history, is by being servants or instruments of reconciliation. This is a key that can open the door to peace and justice. Many years ago, a renowned theologian declared: no world peace without world religions working together.

We believe that education at all levels is one way in which we can help to achieve this by underlining the religious and moral values common to Islam and Christianity — in spite of the obstacles that confront us.

Robert Ellison CSSp, Bishop of Banjul, The Gambia

Practising justice peace and reconciliation

Mgr Wiehe and I spoke about the family — a concern common to our islands and many dioceses in Africa. Many African families in countries at war are subject to ill-treatment by mercenaries. The Church in Africa is called to bring concrete and constant support to these families who suffer so much.

During the synod, African bishops acknowledged with dignity the woes and difficulties of many African countries. They severely condemned the plundering of Africa by Western multinationals, but they confessed that this plundering could not be done without the collaboration of local personalities. They also strongly denounced tribalism as a cause of division in several countries and sometimes in the Church as well. They spoke too about witchcraft and its dire consequences: destruction of families, lynching of individuals.

The great lesson I draw from this synod is the crucial importance of the prophetic role of the Church. The Church has the duty to recall time and again that peace and justice are gifts of God. Based on this hope, a prophetic Church remains alert and encourages all initiatives in the fields of social justice, peace and reconciliation. The Church has to be thankful for these initiatives and celebrate them as gifts of God.

This prophetic role also consists in denouncing all obstacles to social justice, peace and reconciliation: denouncing not only the symptoms but the root causes of injustice and poverty. Last but not least, to be prophetic means to practice justice in our own environment, to work for peace and reconciliation.

*Mgr Maurice E. PIAT CSSp
Bishop of Port-Louis
Mauritius*

*Mgr Denis Wiehe CSSp
Bishop of Port-Victoria
Seychelles*

a search for the truth about itself and about the direction the Spirit was leading it. First, there was the extensive sounding at the local and grassroots levels concerning the theme and issues to be discussed. This led to the drawing up of the Working Document. It in turn became the subject of a lot of theological and popular reflection in many Churches of Africa. Many bishops or Bishops Conferences came to Rome armed with a lot of insight from these discussions and their own insights as well.

Then for three weeks in Rome the Bishops and other participants prayed and reflected together in order to hear more clearly what the Spirit was asking of the Church in Africa. The search for the voice and light of the Spirit was cumbersome and messy at times, culminating in the drawing up of the

propositions and other texts that have been handed over to the Holy Father.

As the Church awaits the final word from the Pope, the Spirit will already begin to move people to action in ways and directions they may not even be aware of, but which will lead us all closer to the truth.

May our sinfulness and shortsightedness not prevent us from hearing clearly what the Spirit is saying to the Church of Africa and indeed to the entire Church through this synod.

Preaching alone does not move people anymore. The world is moved by those who live what they preach.

Church's self-understanding

A second theological issue I want to highlight is that of the self-understanding of the Church, described in different metaphors: servant, hierarchical community, a communion, the new Israel of God, the people of God, etc. Experience shows that one metaphor is always more operative than others in a given church at any given time. This self-understanding of any particular church determines to a large extent what kind of Church you get.

What I experienced at the synod was a Church that understands itself as a leaven or catalyst in line with Jesus' characterization of his community of disciples.

For about three weeks I experienced a church growing in awareness of the great gifts it has been given by God. It has something to offer to Africa and to the world. I also heard a great cry of disappointment at the Church's failure so far to live up to its promise in Africa, for Africa and for the whole world. I heard a Church which was determined as never before to be light and leaven for Africa in cooperation with other African and international entities.

How far will this go? I cannot tell. One thing I am sure of is that the Church in Africa will not be the same after this synod.

Closing Party

When all the talking was done, all the propositions voted on, and all the votes counted, we all went down for a party with the Holy Father. Great food, great wine, great conversation, great hopes that we can unleash the enormous human resources of the African church as forces for positive transformation in Africa.

At the concluding Mass I raised my voice loudly and clearly in prayer with others to the Spirit who continues to speak to his Church today. I know he will not let us sleep in peace again without accomplishing what we have all been sent to do for Africa and for the children of God everywhere, that they may have life and have it to the full. ■