

The African Synod - Initial Results and Reflections

Editorial

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa was announced by Pope John Paul II during the solemnity of the Epiphany, February 6, 1989. The event was celebrated, like other Synods, within the period of one month - April 10 to May 8 1994. But, unlike other synods, it took as long as five years to prepare: longer than the period needed to get ready the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council!

One should not wonder at the time it took to put the Synod together. The need for the whole People of God in Africa to hold a meeting to discuss, share experiences, formulate action programmes in order to take full responsibility for evangelization in the continent was felt by bishops, theologians, clergy and laity as far back as the Vatican II Council. This need started assuming more realistic and structural forms with the establishment of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in 1969. The memorable words of Paul VI addressed to SECAM in Kampala, 1969, "you Africans are missionaries to yourselves" were frequently echoed in the halls of the 1994 synod. Many Episcopal Conferences (especially in Francophone Africa) and theologians wanted a council. Many others were in favour of some other type of meeting. Some were undecided. But most were convinced of the need for a meeting. This may explain the length of time it took to prepare the Catholic Church in Africa for this very important meeting.

In this issue of our **Bulletin**, we listen to the story of those who took active part in the five year preparation of the Synod and/or participated in the synod sessions (Onaiyekan, Tshibangu, Okoye). The contributions of these three, who were so to speak insiders, to this issue of our

Bulletin are more or less similar. This is clear from their enunciation of the focus or key points discussed by the synod - evangelization, inculturation, human promotion, and social communication. But the preliminary assessment of the synod by each one communicates their individual feelings and reflections on this important meeting. Each sees from the concerns of his own local Church what should be the preoccupation of the church in Africa.

Two other presentations by theologians who followed the synod from a distance, Nnamani and Odozor, ponder on themes which emerged as fundamental to the self image or crucial concern of the church in Africa in the year 2000 (Church-as-Family and theology of marriage). The image of Church-as-Family, though not new, has never been fully explored as a model of the church. The synod projects this image as Good News! Similarly, the issue of marriage in Africa which SECAM and national and regional conferences in Africa have agonized over for decades preoccupied the 1994 Synod in a serious way. The gradual and graded approach to marrying in Africa, the public and communal celebration of marriage, the distinctively religious tone which marriage carries are ways in which the African reality enriches the gospel or sacraments, and the gospel in turn transforms the culture through its eschatological intent. These riches are brought by Africa into the communion of Churches for the up-building of the universal Church. In presenting these two theological opinions, our **Bulletin** is making its contribution in proposing patterns of deeper reflection on issues of inculturation in the communion of churches, as desired by the African Synod.

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