

What We Saw And Heard At The African Synod

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0. Introduction

What we saw and heard during the past month was indeed an event of grace from the Lord for all of us who were privileged to have participated directly in the Synod.

For an experience so rich in content and inspiration, I can only give a few general impressions, highlighting some of the issues that struck me most vividly.

My story of the Synod will be in four brief parts: (a) The Synod looks at Church and Society in Africa (b) Critical self-assessment of the Church (c) the specific tasks of evangelization (d) The fruits of the Synod. I shall conclude with a couple of personal remarks.

1. Africa Looks to its Future: The Church in Society in the Light of the Synod for Africa.

A Cry of Anguish

In December last year, the Nigerian Bishops went to Rome on their "Ad Limina" visit. From Rome they took the unprecedented step of issuing a **Christmas Message** to the nation with the significant title "Let not our dreams die". We started off as an independent nation in 1960 with great hopes and expectations. The tragic thirty month civil war heightened rather than diminished these hopes. In the mid seventies, we were planning big: big airports, bit seaports, big industrial installations especially in the iron and steel and the petroleum sector, big universities, – even a brand new big Federal capital to be constructed out of empty virgin land. We were the Giant of Africa, ready to take off to join the orbit of the great world powers. My generation

grew up on that exhilarating mood of optimism. And indeed many of these giant projects actually took off and went a long way.

Then somewhere along the line, around the eighties, things began to turn sour. One after the other, many hopes of previous decades were postponed and eventually abandoned; thanks to a tragic collusion between mismanagement and corruption at home, and a hostile and merciless economic atmosphere abroad. Thus hopes became mere dreams. But even dreams became an act of faith possible only for the most optimistic. One had the feeling of being in a jet plane at top speed eating up a run-way but unable to take off and unable to halt. The Christmas message of the Bishops was a cry of anguish to our rulers to keep our dreams of greatness alive; and a call of encouragement to all our people not to give up.

The experience of Nigeria is the experience of the rest of Africa - except that it is still worse in many places. The special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, ("African Synod" for short) gave us an opportunity to compare notes, listen to one another's stories, and reflect together. This only confirmed the sad fact that "to look to the future of Africa" is anything but cheerful. But we did, and we refused to despair. We were even able to disperse on a note of joy and hope, having reinforced our solidarity, renewed our commitment to integral evangelization, and rededicated ourselves to the Risen Lord of history. How did this happen? Let me take you back again to the proceedings of the Synod.

1.1. The Present situation of Church and Society in Africa

1.1.1. A mosaic of Experiences

As in all Synods, the first days were devoted to listening to brief (8 minutes) speeches from the Synod Fathers. We heard over 200 speeches from all parts of Africa. It was a most enriching experience, and we listened to the variety of situations of the Church and Society on our continent. It was most edifying to note a genuine

interest of the Assembly in what each had to say. While Egypt was present at Pentecost 2000 years ago, one bishop from Chad invited the Synod Fathers to the first centenary of the beginning of evangelization in his diocese - scheduled for the year 2030! Places like Mauritania, Djibouti and Libya are only a Church of presence with no hope and hardly any intentions of winning converts, while some dioceses in black Africa are baptizing thousands of adult catechumens every year. Islam is a major factor in many places, with different types of relationships with the Church, ranging from "very good" in Senegal, equilibrium of forces in Nigeria, a tolerated ministry in the Maghreb, a precarious survival in Egypt to outright policy of extermination of christians in the Sudan. We shall come back to this point later.

1.1.2. A success story

But on the whole, the dominant note was one of gratitude to God for what has become generally acknowledged as an extraordinary success story of rapid growth and vitality of the Catholic Church in Africa. A Nigerian Church historian Fr. C. Obi traced the history of evangelization in Africa and showed how the spirit has acted according "to the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7). Cardinal Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, painted an exhilarating picture of the present rapid pace of growth of the Catholic Church in Africa - with all the facts, figures and statistics for which his offices in Piazza di Spagna are famous and deservedly respected. Particularly spectacular is the rapid change in holders of leadership roles from foreign missionaries to indigenous and often young persons. The composition of the Synod Assembly, and the high quality of its members was an eloquent demonstration of the progresses made in a few decades.

1.1.3. The Society at large

The Synod opened with the horrible news of the

fratricidal massacres in Rwanda, one of the most evangelized countries of Africa. In many cases, Catholics were killing Catholics. Among the list of corrupt and dictatorial rulers are some who claim to be Catholics. In many countries, bishops were called upon to mediate in the deep political crisis facing their nations groping their way to democracy. This was greeted as a sign of the confidence which the people have in the catholic clergy and especially in its hierarchy. But that also raises the question of the sense of political responsibility of the Catholic lay citizens. In a few countries, there is progress in the direction of greater political stability. But most countries are still badly ruled; some very badly ruled.

The political crisis compounds an already difficult economic situation. In Nigeria the middle class has practically been wiped out as general standard of living plummets. Social services - schools, health care services and welfare programmes - are disintegrating under the structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), and the international financial institutions, the IMF and the World Bank, congratulate our leaders for a job well done. The person in the street hears we are heavily indebted. But he/she wonders what we bought and cannot understand why he/she must pay for the mistakes - or greed - of others. The youth have hardly any future to look forward to. There is little incentive to study hard: many with first class certificates are roaming the streets unemployed, or have had to escape abroad on self-exile. We heard in the Synod that this is the situation in most of the continent. The news of successful elections in South Africa was a breath of fresh air, for which we rejoice and thank the Lord. But the general picture is still one of general disintegration and misery.

1.1.4. Church and Society

The Synod faced squarely the challenge of being Church in the concrete situation of Africa of today. How can the Gospel Message be "good news" in a continent so full of "bad news"? What must the Church be in order that "her

message may be relevant and credible". Statistics can tell only a part of the story. It is important to count and rejoice in the number of converts. But it is even more important to assess what impact the christian message is making on the daily lives of our people and to what extent Gospel values of peace, justice, and love are being promoted.

2. Critical Self-assessment

In this assessment, the two key concepts of **evangelization** as our mission and **Church** as the agent of that mission gained our close attention.

2.1. Integral Evangelization

The main theme of the Synod was evangelization. It was also the unifying factor which tied together the various items on the Synod agenda. The Synod stressed the importance and priority of the **Proclamation** of the good news of Christ in an explicit fashion to all who have not accepted it in faith. But it was also strengthened in the conviction that evangelization in Africa today necessarily entails close attention to inculturation, openness to dialogue especially with other believers in Christ and in God, and a deep involvement in the promotion of justice and peace. Furthermore, social communication, whether with modern or traditional means, is not only a necessary instrument of evangelization, but also a world to be evangelized. In this discussion, frequent references were made to the great missionary documents of the Magisterium, *Ad Gentes* of Vatican II, *Evangelium Nuntiandi* of Paul VI, and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II. There was a calm and unanimous conviction on the complexity and inter-relatedness of the different tasks of evangelization referred to above. At least for the African Church the days of polemics and debates over the scope of evangelization seem over.

2.2. The Church as Agent of Evangelization

A lot of attention was paid to examining the Church as it now exists in Africa, with its strengths and weaknesses. Generally young and vibrant, it is full of the enthusiasm and optimism which the experience of growth bestows. On the other hand, it needs to deepen its spiritual conviction, pursue the full knowledge of the truth of the Gospel and mobilize itself ever more effectively for mission in co-responsibility and collaboration. The irreplaceable value of witness of life was stressed for all in the Church, clergy, religious and laity. The witness of the laity in the market-places of life was acknowledged as crucial if Africa is to enjoy the redeeming message of the Gospel.

Already in the pre-Synodal documents, the concept of the Church as Family of God had emerged as a most appropriate ecclesiological image in Africa with its rich traditions on the family. This came out even stronger in the Synod proceedings as an image which emphasizes care for the other, solidarity, warmth of relations, acceptance, dialogue and trust. It also shows how authority is exercised as service in love. The hope was expressed that an African ecclesiology would soon emerge based on this concept of Church as family, a concept that is not without biblical foundation. The experience of Small Christian Communities in AMECEA countries of Eastern Africa and now spreading to many other parts of Africa was consistently proposed as a concrete model of how the ecclesiology of Church-Family can be brought to the daily and direct experience of the people at the local level.

2.3. A Missionary Church

Despite the phenomenal growth of the Church in Africa, there is still a lot to do to bring the christian message to every one on the continent, hence the need for the Church in Africa to be missionary in its thrust. We were reminded of the prophetic words of Pope Paul VI in 1969 that Africans must be missionaries to Africa. The work and achievements of the foreign missionaries were acknowledged

in deservedly flowing terms and their continued role stressed. But the participation of Africans in the missionary programme of the Church at home and abroad, whether in inter-continental or in African missionary institutes was a cause of joy and sign of a Church come of age. Missionary awareness is to be further promoted at all levels in the Church. There were passionate pleas for African missionaries to go to the aid of more needy areas, like the Muslim dominated areas of North Africa, among the Afro-Americans of Latin America and the Caribbeans, as well as among the growing communities of African immigrants and refugees in Europe. How a poor Church is to handle meeting the financial costs of *missio ad gentes* was left for further reflection. It would need to be seen as an aspect of the broader question of the financial self-reliance of our churches. In any case, we have to encourage our people to support the missions even from their own poverty, especially as some are poorer than others.

3. The specific tasks of Evangelization

After proclamation, and within the context of evangelization, the Synod reflected at length on each of the four other tasks of evangelization mentioned in the pre-synodal documents. We noted as the synod progressed that emphasis fell more and more on **proclamation** compared with the other four. I believe this too is a correct reflection of the right scale of priorities. For example, of the 62 propositions formulated as summaries of the Synod work, 26 were on proclamation. The rest were as follows: Inculturation - 10, Dialogue - 6, Justice and Peace - 12, Social Communication - 7. Many important issues were raised.

3.1 Inculturation

This was tackled in a most responsible and serious fashion. Its theological basis was clarified in terms of such fundamental theological concepts as Trinity, Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery. The aim, it was stressed, is to bridge the gap between faith and life, not to offer a cheap and

easy form of Christianity. The usual areas of liturgy, theological formulation, and marriage were discussed. But if anyone was expecting any extravagant ideas or a "major break-through" in these matters, the Synod would be a disappointment. Rather, there was unity of mind in continuity with existing tradition on the level of principles, while pastoral attention, serious studies, and courageous exploitation of existing areas of freedom in experimentation were strongly recommended. Here too, the difference is clear from place to place, not only as regards practical challenges but also as to how much progress has been made.

3.2. Dialogue

The discussion on dialogue followed the line of the pre-synodal documents, with a significant emphasis on the need to nurture a spirit of dialogue and to practice it within the Church all across the board. More time was however devoted to dialogue with African Traditional Religions (ATR) and with Islam.

As regards ATR, it can be said that the Synod finally rehabilitated the religion of our fore-fathers, giving full recognition to the genuine religious values it contains. It is this which makes the African so open to the Gospel message. The authoritative exponents and devout followers of these religions deserve respect.

A lot was said about Islam. There are serious problems in relationship in many places where intolerance, oppression and at times even violence and killing are perpetrated by people who claim to be defending or promoting Islam. Such problems become challenges to be faced in faith, humility and love. We reflected together on how to respond in an evangelical way to provocation and violence. There is need for prayer, and the dialogue of love and life. But there is also need for effective action at all levels: religious, political, diplomatic. The bottom line: the Synod rejects meeting violence with violence. In limit cases, the principles of legitimate self-defence and the disarming of the unjust aggressor were evoked. We should continue to stress that

freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and we should challenge all governments, including Islamic nations, to respect this right.

3.3. On Justice and Peace

The emphasis was on the responsibility of Africa and its rulers to evolve a more stable political climate, stop mismanagement and embezzlement of scarce public resources, and avoid fratricidal conflicts and wars. But also, the foreign dimensions were high-lighted: the burdens of the colonial past, the unjust structures of world trade, commerce and finances, the debt burden, arms trafficking and the collusion of foreign and local rogues to loot the treasuries of our nations.

The local churches are to continue their prophetic roles, intensify programmes for justice and peace and show by example what a just society should be. The Synod also challenged the local churches in rich lands to make themselves advocates of greater justice in international relations with their governments and with international organizations.

3.4. Social Communication

This topic received the least attention in terms of volume of ideas. But the much that was said was very important. The pre-Synodal documents contain most of what was discussed: the need to pay attention to both modern and traditional media, the power of the modern means of communication, the media world as both subject and object of evangelization. Important practical issues raised include: project of continental radio station for Africa, satellite channel for global evangelization, freedom for media people, and the need to insist that all media, state and private, serve the people.

4. Fruits of the Synod

The Pope has repeatedly announced that he will visit

Africa to celebrate the fruits of the Synod. This Synod has taken a long time to prepare. But there is a consensus that it was well worth all the long preparation. The fruits which began already before the Synod itself, matured during the one month working session. What are these fruits?

4.1 Post-Synodal Exhortation

Like in every Synod, we are expecting a **Post-Synodal exhortation** of the Pope on the work of the Synod. This will be based on all the documentations of the Synod process: Lineamenta, Instrumentum Laboris and all the papers and reports produced at the Synod. This will be a final record of the Synod to serve as point of reference for posterity.

4.2. The Propositions

The propositions will form a major source for this final document. According to the well tried Synod process, the **Propositions** are a way of summarizing the broad consensus of the Synod Fathers on the theme of the Synod. The long and sometimes tedious process of formulating, discussing, reformulating, negotiating, compromising which goes into the production of the final list of propositions, is an admirable exercise in collegiality. In this process, the Synod Fathers share ideas, debate them in a spirit of search for the truth in order to arrive at a common mind.

Since they are elaborated mainly in the "circuli minores" or discussion groups - where observers and "experts" can make contributions - these propositions are also an effective way for admitting valid input from those who may have a right to address the Synod as "Synod Fathers".

By the ingenious process of moving from small groups to general assembly and back again to small groups, it was possible for the over 250 Synod Fathers to discuss in depth in groups while sharing the ideas of everyone else through the unified lists of propositions and amendments. The key figures in all this process of gestation are the **group reporters**, while the **Relator Generalis** and his team ensured a global view that is also faithful to the spirit and

richness of the Synod.

4.3 The Message

Already the Synod itself did publish a **Message**, a document that tried to capture the general mood of the Synod and to give the People of God and the general public an immediate communication on the Synod. Drafted by a commission appointed for the purpose, the message received a general approval of the Synod Assembly, but did not go through the rigorous process, amendments and votings of the propositions. It is nevertheless a useful record, especially while we wait for the Pope's final document.

4.4. Collegial solidarity

A Synod, and especially an African Synod cannot have its abundant fruits adequately wrapped up in a document. The Synod is an experience of grace: to celebrate, to share, to live by. For a month, we made the experience of living in a Church that is a Family of God, united in love across boundaries of nations, race and social conditions. Our collegial reflection has enriched each one. The most important fruit is what we all take back in terms of convictions, ideas, and inspirations for the future. It is now important to share this fruit first with the other members of the African hierarchy who remained at home, and then with the members of Christ's faithful in our respective dioceses. In this sense, the fruit of the Synod has begun and will last well beyond the year 2000.

5. Conclusion

I wish to conclude with two brief remarks. First, in this Synod, an admirable degree of common mind was experienced, despite the wide variety of the African continent. In particular, on matters of principle, whether in faith or moral, there was no case of any sharp divisions. Even on the level of pastoral perceptions and concrete

suggestions for action, differences of positions were accommodated as representing different responses to different challenges. The principal aim - to promote evangelization in the different circumstances of the Church in Africa - united us all in a common chorus, singing in harmony with different voices and instruments.

Secondly, I have been personally edified at the palpable sense of solidarity and "feeling-with" in respect of churches in conditions of dramatic difficulties: war in Rwanda, religious persecution in Sudan, the Church of mere presence in Islamic nations. We all felt challenged to share one another's burdens and pains. May be that is also why the Synod was such a joyful celebration of the Risen Lord reigning in the church and in the world.