

# The Special Synod for Africa and the Tasks of African Theology

Tharcisse Tshibangu

## I. The Synod: Its Finality and Objectives

1) We must give thanks and glory to God, who has made a gift of the "African Synod" to the Universal Church and particularly to the Church of Africa. It has just held its meetings in Rome under the presidency of the Pope himself, John Paul II. The Pope deserves homage for the inspiration and for his convinced faith in the future of the Church of Africa, that decided him to convoke this special Synod for Africa which we have just lived through in great hope and with warm enthusiasm from 10 April to 8 May.

2) As we had occasion to recall, this Synod was the object of great hope and was much awaited. Its conclusions and orientations will be communicated by the Pope at an opportune moment.

3) African lay people, priests, religious, theologians, bishops, all helped ardently to mould this event and contributed to it, each in his or her manner and at his or her level, in the preparation and both before and after the actual convening by the Holy Father.

4) At first there was question of an "African Council" or, in default of that, an "African Synod" for a start. Having taken account of all relevant elements the Pope decided to convoke the African Synod according to the form and modalities he determined. We were called then to a great dialogue, which Pope John Paul II himself recognized as necessary at this historic moment on the eve of the third millennium of the Christian Church and era.

5) Our task was to analyze and take stock of the general situation prevailing in Africa at this moment and examine seriously the religious problems arising on the continent as a whole; we would also notice the indispensable conditions

for the effective commitment of all believers and especially of Catholic Christians. This would be with a view to the integral and harmonious development and the full maturing on a spiritual base of the African person and of all the peoples of Africa in justice and peace on these levels: cultural, social, economic and political.

The Synod undertook to accomplish this programme with reference to the theme that was defined for it: "The Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000: 'You will be my witnesses' (Acts 1:8)".

## **II. The Main Theological Tasks After the Synod**

### **A. African Theology and Its Intent**

1) The theology which is being articulated and developed in Africa is commonly called today 'African Theology'. The chief sources of African theology on a scientific level are established from a given basic **epistemological approach** which is becoming clearer every day:

- i) Like every Christian theology it refers to the Word of God in the biblical revelation and the whole heritage of Christian tradition;
- ii) A deep and profound study of all that is positive for Christianity in the essence and spirit of traditional African religions;
- iii) Total African anthropology;
- iv) The contextualization and so the consideration of all contemporary realities which pose problems about value-options and ethical questions.

African theology is taking shape. More and more it is differentiating itself by its intent, context of articulation and given orientations from the currents and tendencies of Western theology, which has become more and more analytic and historic than genuinely hermeneutic. In the heart of the Third World theologies (cf the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) it wants to be a 'Theology of the

Integral Salvation of the Human Person, which on the one side develops into a 'Theology of Inculturation' and on the other into a 'Theology of Human and Socio-Economic Promotion'.

2) So far the theological enterprise in Africa has addressed the following questions. Numerous publications appear on them, more or less researched and more or less scientifically critical. We note:

- : Christological essays and studies;
- : Ecclesiological researches on the characteristics that ought to mark the status and functioning of the African Church (For example, the Church as 'family' or the Church as 'Spirit' more than institutional structure and so on);
- : Moral theology and the examination of specific ethical questions regarding the African cultural tradition;
- : The African liturgical movement and the development of systems of rites and sacraments;
- : The installing of new pastoral ministries relevant to the needs of the Church and of the Christian communities;
- : Problems of 'political liberation' and conditions of integral human promotion...

Moreover, desires of a canonical order have already been expressed, with a view to structuring Church organization in the most appropriate and relevant manner in Africa. We may note on this point that the African Church is invited already to determine in collegiality the 'particular juridical norms' that seem opportune to it within the framework of what the present Code of Canon Law of 1983 permits.

## **B. Essential Elements Retained by the Synod and Doctrinal Orientations**

1) There was much talk at the Synod of 'the fundamental principle of inculturation' as an exigence and norm of evangelization. This appeared to be the Synod's central

concerning. On this point, the summit of the incarnation of Christianity and of the inculturation of the Christian faith will take place at the level of doctrinal assimilation and then of its expression when those in the young Churches are capable of working to the point of a 'rethinking' of theological understanding, that itself is preceded by a new questioning, when it seems necessary, of the data of Christian revelation in view of a deeper understanding of it.

2) This is even the recommendation of Vatican II in *Ad Gentes*, no. 22:

If this goal is to be achieved, theological investigation must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area, as it is called. In this way, under the light of the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been consigned to sacred Scripture, and which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and the teaching authority of the Church.

Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith can seek for understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples. A better view will be gained of how their customs, outlook on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation.<sup>2</sup>

### **C. Specific Themes of Investigation and Research**

With regard to the particularly important and specifically urgent themes to be examined in depth after the Synod, the following have a place. They are grouped and presented according to the titles of the chapters as they were discussed in the Synod assembly.

#### **In relation to the Proclamation and Witness' of the Gospel:**

1. A deeper understanding of the foundations and conditions so that 'evangelization' may be effectively and always 'centred on meeting with the living Person of

Christ'.

2. To expose at length and teach by word and by witness of life that 'holiness as a living expression of configuration to Christ be presented always as the finality of evangelization'.

3. To deepen in Africa the reality of the Church, which is the institutional agent and framework of the whole of evangelization by considering it as 'Church-as-Family of God'. This will show still better how the different members are in relation to one another in trust and dialogue and how authority is service in love'. So the Synod explicitly encourages theologians to develop the theology of Church-as-family in its richness while remaining aware of its limits.

4. With the 'Living Ecclesial Communities' or "Basic Ecclesial Communities' there be founded a pastoral of evangelization as a theological "locus', source and reference at its own level and in its contextual framework.

5. Continued study of the status and roles of the laity in the present situation but with perspectives on the future to discern the nature of its specific being in the Church and to determine all the functions that fall to lay people in society.

#### **In relation to 'Inculturation':**

1. Two propositions like the following should be clarified and studied better as theological basis for inculturation:

Jesus Christ, Son of God made Man, crucified and risen in glory, is the centre and model of all aspects of the Christian life...

Every culture needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the Mystery of Easter...

2. To clarify, and to ground if necessary, the criteria of inculturation. The Synod offers two essential ones: (a) compatibility with the Christian message; (b) communion with the Universal Church.

In a practical way and as concrete action, a reference could be opportune to the Instruction given in 1659 by the Sacred Congregation De Propaganda Fide to missionaries in

the Far East. It must be noted that the final reference in case of doubt or hesitation is the Magisterium of the Church.

3. According to the Synod, theology will pursue the examination and deeper study of the areas thus described:

'inculturation' aims at permitting humans to welcome Jesus Christ in the wholeness of his personal being, which is realized and accomplished in different dimensions: cultural, social, economic and political.

it declares likewise that inculturation comprises all aspects of ecclesial life: theology (faith and morality), liturgy (sacraments and sacramentals), the Church's life and structure (ecclesiology, the status of consecrated life, the Church's norms and laws)

certain questions are emphasized by the Synod as being of particularly urgent interest -

- the domain of liturgy
- specific problems of marriage in Africa, to be studied 'from the theological, sacramental, liturgical and canonical points of view'
- the question of the legitimacy of the veneration of ancestors, under certain Christian conditions to be determined
- African beliefs in 'the world of spirits', good or bad, in relation to the phenomenon of 'witchcraft'.

**In relation to 'Dialogue':**

In a general way this point is about the theological conditions for assuming an ecumenical spirit and a spirit of positive and efficacious dialogue in the bosom of the African Church and in relation to African society. This would be between the different members of the Church, with other Christian denominations, with Islam and Moslems and in connection with the positive values in African traditional religions from the Christian point of view.

**In relation to 'Justice and Peace' :**

1. A researched contextual theology must be elaborated in Africa on the prophetic role of the Church and the

duties of all its members on this point, from bishops to lay people, passing through priests and those in consecrated life. In this connection a serious and genuine 'theology of the integral salvation of the human person in his/her concrete circumstances' should be studied in depth and well articulated for the attention of all.

2. The Synod brought special attention to bear on the ecclesial and social status of women and their indispensable role in the Church and society. Theologians must work on the orientations given by Pope John Paul II in his **Apostolic Exhortation** on woman and her mission; they will take account of all the factors, religious, cultural and social, which affect the African woman in her life and action.

3. **Family ethic and bio-ethic:** There arose from all the exchanges in the Synod on family problems an insistent demand to safeguard those traditional family values that are deemed valid from the Christian point of view, the promotion of values that will 'save the family', first cell and 'precious patrimony of humanity'. Along this line theologians, in collaboration and solidarity with thinkers and specialists in all aspects of the family, will arrange to set up **structures and study-commissions** that deal especially with problems of a moral and ethical aspect concerning **conjugal life**, the theories and principles that concern population (demographic politics) and **development**. There is also an urgent need for Africa to create **commissions on bio-ethics** on the level of the continent and as national units, as exist in the West and other countries.

4. **The ethic of international relations:** The Synod denounced the injustices existing in the system of international relations; especially between the poor African countries that are in need and the well-to-do countries, the industrial nations. Theologians and other thinkers in Africa are invited to propose the principles of a **deontological and ethical code** that will determine international relations in equity for the future; they will base themselves for this on the expert scientific analyses of specialists in the diverse socio-economic disciplines. This orientation towards future research has been felt necessary considering notably the economic and financial relationships that have led to the

situation of the enormous debts Africa owes to the countries and financial institutions of the north.

**In relation to the means of 'social Communications':**

The importance and role of the mass media is evident and goes without saying in our contemporary world. Here theologians will have to **ground** ever more the principle of access by everyone to the means of social communication and the principle of freedom of expression within the legitimate limits of the law. Likewise it is urgent for African theology and Christian thought in general to show and recall the principles of morality to be respected by all in the use of the mass media.

**III. The Linking of African Theological Work to That of the Universal Church**

1. The African Synod, in outlining ways forward and determining the fields of research considered urgent and having priority with regard to pastoral work as a whole in the post-synodal period, invites us to consider the positive, constructive contributions African theological work is making to the benefit of the whole Church of Jesus Christ. These contributions concern especially the **doctrine of the sacraments, ecumenism**, the problems of **secularization**, the efforts of the Universal Church in view of the 'Christian inculturation' of contemporary technico-scientific culture.

2. Furthermore, African theologians like all others in other continents must promote a '**prospective**' thought in order to sense, forestall and foresee the doctrinal and pastoral problems of the future. They must undertake studies in a **general prospective** and more particularly in a **spiritual and religious prospective**. The future of humanity in general and particularly the future of religion and Christianity must be prepared in a more committed way by using the scientific and technical instruments presently available. Ours is a great apostolic and missionary job, 'to evangelize the future', one might say, by contributing to 'project' and 'make' the future of Christianity. It is striving to make 'the ideal and preferable future' of the

Church as reality, making a choice among 'future possibles', which themselves are situated beyond 'future probables' in the foreseeable prolonged direction of the present state of things and the tendencies of facts, ideas and doctrine.

#### IV. Fallout from the Synod and Sequel to It

1. The dynamic of an ecclesial and spiritual 'Event' as important as the African Synod that we have just lived through demands a sequel to its reflections and propositions. This holds first of all for all the propositions that are purely of doctrinal orientation. On the other hand, although this point was not directly addressed or examined in depth by the Synod, it would be normal to foresee in the more or less long term new establishments of an institutional and also structural order; these would simply be logical, operational consequences of the perspectives opened by the Synod.

2. It is probable, and already foreseen, that meetings will take place in a limited or larger way in the months and years to come in order to concretize the gains of the Synod and envisage ways of putting its recommendations to work. In this perspective we congratulate the **Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples** and the **Pontifical Urban University** for having taken the first initiative of calling a large meeting in Rome for information, evaluation and reflection for the future, some days after the African Synod closed. It is an example that will be followed.

#### V. Conclusion

I can finish this short contribution I was asked to make in no better way than by quoting with satisfaction and in a spirit of faithful service to the Church the confident address to African theologians contained in the Final Message of the Synod:

Your mission is a great and noble one in the service of inculturation which is the important site for the development of African theology. You have already

begun to propose an African reading of the mystery of Christ. The concepts of Church-as-Family, Church-as-Brotherhood, are the fruits of your work in contact with the Christian experience of the People of God in Africa. The Synod knows that without the conscientious and devoted exercise of your function something essential would be lacking. The Synod expresses its gratitude and its encouragement to you to continue working with your distinctive role certainly, but in communion with your Pastors so that the doctrinal riches which will flow from this Assembly may be deepened for the benefit of our particular Churches and the universal Church (No. 56)<sup>3</sup>.

It is for African theologians to get down to work now with more ardour, full of confidence in themselves and full of faith and hope for the future.

#### ENDNOTES

1. For its history, see among others: T. Tshibangu, *La Théologie africaine. Manifeste et Programme pour le développement des Activités théologiques en Afrique*. Ed. St Paul, 1987.
2. Translation of W.M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*.
3. Translation of *L'Osservatore Romano*.

(Delivered at the Pontifical Urban University, Rome, 12 May 1994).

Translated by Myles L. Fay cssp.