

# CHURCH IN AFRICA: RELEVANT AND CREDIBLE?

## *The Challenge of the Second African Synod*



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**The Challenge of the Second African Synod**

**by**

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# INTRODUCTION

On 28 June 2007, Pope Benedict XVI called for the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops to be held in the Vatican in October 2009. The theme of this Second Assembly is: “**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’ (Matthew 5: 13-15).**” This synod will come 15 years after the 1994 Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, now commonly referred to as the First African Synod.

Synods of Bishops have regularly been held since the conclusion of Vatican Two, devoting attention both to the *universal* topics such as evangelisation, laity or scripture, or *geographically localised* with a focus, for example, on the Church in Europe, the Americas or Asia. Unlike a Council which can make decrees, a Synod is, in the present Roman dispensation, only “consultative.” This means it can only make recommendations which are referred to the Pope for follow-up.

## PROCESS OF SYNOD

The process begins with the calling of a Synod by the Pope, and the issuing of a preparatory document called the *Lineamenta* or “Discussion Guidelines.” This document is a guide of topics and questions and serves as the basis for discussion in the dioceses throughout Africa. The Bishops conferences then submit to Rome the results of these discussions. Then an *Instrumentum Laboris* or “Working Paper” is distributed to the Bishops for their consideration during the actual Synod meetings.

The deliberations of a Synod are usually followed by an “**Apostolic Exhortation**” from the Pope highlighting special areas for ecclesial attention and pastoral response. For example, after the 1994 Synod, Pope John Paul II issued an important document in 1995, *The Church in Africa (Ecclesia in Africa)*.

In preparation for the Second African Synod, Christians from all corners of Africa have been urged to read the *Lineamenta* and discuss the crucial issues that they feel should be discussed during the African Synod meeting in 2009 in Rome. It is in this view that Bishops and their advisors from the AMECEA countries will gather in Lusaka in June and July of this year to prepare themselves for the Synod.

## **PURPOSE OF BOOKLET**

The purpose of this JCTR booklet is to help to prepare for the African Synod by increasing awareness about it and its importance to Catholics and others in Zambia and wider in Africa and around the world. We contribute to such a preparation by suggesting answers to these important questions:

- 1. Have we achieved the themes and recommendations of the First African Synod?**
- 2. What are our expectations of the Second African Synod?**
- 3. How best can we prepare and participate for the Second African Synod?**

These questions and others are answered here in a *reflective* way. Although theological issues are touched on drawing from the church social teaching, this is not a dogmatic document. Working in Zambia, our reflections are from the Zambian context.

In the first paper, Dominic Liche presents some reflections on the achievements and challenges of the First African Synod and what that means as we move into the next phase of Church life in Zambia. In the second paper, Peter Henriot looks at what is key to reflect on as we go into the Second African Synod. In the third paper, Henriot gives some ways in which AMECEA Bishops and Christians can best prepare and participate in the Synod. Our booklet ends with some questions for reflection, mostly extracted from the *Lineamenta*, to be used by Christian groups and readers in this preparation.

## **HOPES AND PRAYERS**

It is our hope and prayer that indeed the Church in Africa will continue to grow and contextualize our Christian faith in the African context, in a “relevant and credible” way. We at the JCTR look forward to readers’ comments, questions and suggestions.

# LOOKING BACK AT THE FIRST AFRICAN SYNOD

*Dominic Liche*

## HAPPY BEGINNINGS

1994 or was it 1995? A flamboyant mass with lots of dancing, sounds of drums, clapping of hands, ululations, colourful clothes, long processions, excitement, laughter, and friendly gestures. Could this really be a Catholic Mass taking place in Rome? I pondered. It looked like something that might take place in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) or South Africa, or even Zambia.

Then the commentator came on and I realised it was indeed in the Vatican at an opening Mass of the First African Synod. As one friend commented years later, “We really showcased the Church in Africa and how well and cheerfully we celebrate, not just our Eucharistic celebrations, but more so our day-to-day lives.”

I was watching a documentary of the “Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa” which took place from 10 April to 08 May 1994 in Rome. This Special Assembly called by Pope John Paul II, the first of its kind in Africa, is now commonly known as the First African Synod. The main purpose of this Synod was to look at the Church in Africa under the theme, “The Church in African and Her Evangelising Mission towards the Year 2000: You Shall Be My Witnesses (Acts 1:8).”

In other words, how could the Church in Africa carry out her evangelising mission in Africa? And how could the African Christian become ever more faithful witnesses to the Lord Jesus? In my own words, “How could the Christian faith become relevant to the African context, given all the cultural, socio-economic, political, and religious challenges Africa faced and still faces today?”

In their deliberations, the Bishops of the Synod adopted the image of the “family” as a model of an evangelising Church. For most Christians in Zambia, we identified ourselves with this image. I would almost safely say that the simplified theme for the First African Synod can be seen as “The Church in Africa as a Family of God.” The strong bond of an African family, the whole idea of an extended family, and the emphasis on values of sharing and warmth in relationships prompted this image.

## MAJOR TOPICS

The major connection between the Family of God and evangelisation is that evangelisation in Africa would aim at building up the Church in Africa as a family. It is in this line that it was recognised that theologians in Africa would have a big task to work out an African Theology. This means a theology that is really *relevant* to Africans but also deeply *rooted* in the Bible, the Church's tradition, and the Church's teaching like that of the Second Vatican Council.

Five major topics or sub-themes can be seen as coming from the major theme of *evangelisation*. These are:

- *Proclamation* – how should the Good News be proclaimed in Africa so that it is known everywhere?
- *Inculturation* – how to bring the Gospel message of faith, hope and love, of justice, forgiveness and peace to our culture?
- *Dialogue* (both within the Church and with other religions) – how to bring the Gospel message to people of different groups and different religions?
- *Justice and Peace* – how to bring the Gospel message to our community and society in ways that promote community and solidarity?
- *Social Communication* – how to bring the Gospel message to the world of the modern mass media?

In looking at the successes and challenges of the First African Synod, I concentrate on these five sub-themes and look critically at the relevance of the model of the “Church as Family of God.”

## SUCCESSES!

The African Church can be seen as a relatively very young Church. Most African countries first heard of the Gospel message in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Unfortunately often mixed with colonialism, Christianity in some forms has been linked to things “foreign” or things imported from outside Africa. As a consequence, it has been questioned by some as to whether it has little or no real relevance to Africans.

This “foreignness” has been characterised by rites and rituals from outside Africa which look strange to many or even most Africans (e.g., wearing white gowns and elaborate garments at Mass; anointing using special oils; using unleavened bread and wine – alcohol -- as species for Eucharistic celebration,

etc.). Moreover, the Catholic Church for many years was a community mostly administrated by “outside Africa” missionaries, a church that based most of its teachings on documents from “outside Africa,” and a church mostly funded by “outside Africa.” Given these perceptions – some more real than others -- it became difficult for many African Christians to profoundly personalise the faith into which they were baptised.

### ***Family of God***

The First African Synod, in extensive preparations here in Africa and in lively sessions in Rome, concentrated on how the Gospel message should be evangelised so that it could be *owned* by Africans. This is indeed a blessing for Africans and a chance to have a faith that makes sense to them.

The stress to find the appropriate model of the Church of Africa as the “Family of God” is an example of searching for a relevant approach. Africans in general treasure their families and live happily in the midst of immediate and extended families. Despite the challenges of the weakening ties with the extended family due to modern pressures (scarce economic resources for example), this model of Church as family still speaks to most of us Africans and those working in Africa.

Due to the high sense of tribalism, nationalism, and ethnicity in Africa, proclaiming that being a Christian should transcend all these barriers of tribe, nation, or ethnic grouping has shown a new and very important way Africans can be relating to each other in faith. That surely is a success – and a continuing challenge – of the First African Synod.

### ***Justice and Peace***

As so many times said during the Synod and in the various documents written after the event, the Synod was a *moment of hope and grace*. We remember that it was at the start of April 1994 that the Rwandan genocide began. But at the same time it was at the start of May of that same year that South Africa elected Nelson Mandela and moved away from the crime of Apartheid. Moreover, it was in the 1990s that the HIV and AIDS pandemic took strong root in most African countries, especially those of sub-Saharan Africa. And it was during this time, as is true even today, that poverty and hunger were rampant and devastating and that displacement within and between countries was occurring because of war, conflicts, and natural disasters such as floods. The list of political and socio-economic problems was and is all too long!



Having a top level gathering of leaders of the African Church considering these issues seriously can be counted as another major success of the Synod. The Church operates and is within the lives of the local people. There is no joy in a Church that has as its members people who are sick, hungry, in poverty, oppressed, in slavery, etc. A Church that does not look at the social, political, economic, and cultural context of its people has truly failed in the task of Evangelisation.

In the Zambian context, we have found the Church speaking out more and more on the social conditions of the people and calling courageously for greater social justice. This engagement has occurred through institutions such as Caritas Zambia (formerly CCJDP) training local groups to respond to social issues; Zambia Episcopal Conference (ZEC) teaching through pastoral letters (often produced in an ecumenical fashion); Churches Health Association of Zambia (CHAZ) addressing health issues, especially issues connected to HIV and AIDS; and the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) dealing with numerous social topics such as human rights, good governance and politics, environment, debt, trade and aid, and basic living conditions.

Christians in Africa have come to identify with the Church more when church leaders and institutions talk about such issues and become engaged in real life questions. This has helped Christians find the Gospel more relevant to their day-to-day lives. Surely this is a success story from the First African Synod!

### ***Liturgy***

“We always look forward to going to Church on Sunday.” I heard this said by one youth in a rural outstation of Chipata Diocese in the late 1990s. *Why?* “Because in Church today, we sing songs that are exciting, we drum drums the way we have always known, we dance dances that we dance when we are happy in our village, and we perform some rituals that are similar to rituals in our own traditional ceremonies, like reconciliation rites.”

Looking back now more than ten years ago, I recall how the change in liturgical celebrations came about and how exciting it was, not only for us youth but for the whole community. Catechists, choir coordinators, and liturgy committees were all looking around for meaningful traditional ways of presenting the Gospel message. This had never happened in depth before the First African Synod.

Starting with that magnificent liturgical celebration at the opening of the First African Synod to today, we have seen the Eucharistic celebrations in which Christians are participating more and more and engaged prayerfully in ways they can identify with. The liturgy through the incorporation of good cultural practices has become a uniquely African experience. Think for a moment of the beautiful art, music and dance of the Poor Clare Sisters in Lusaka, or the rich contribution of the Mukanzubo Kalinda Institute in Monze.

## ***Communities***

Spreading (proclamation) of the Good News was described as the main task of the Family of God. It has been recognised that for people to authentically share the Good News, they must accept Jesus and his message into their own lives. The family, small Christian communities (SCC), laity, catechists, young people, religious, seminarians, deacons, and bishops were all identified as the agents of this proclamation. Since the First African Synod, we have seen great successes in proclamation.

For example, we have witnessed the creation of the small Christian communities which have been a viable unit in most parishes in evangelising and dealing with problems that Christians face on a day-to-day basis. These SCC – good examples of making real the model of Church as Family of God – have done much through regular (weekly for example) meetings in local neighbourhoods, both urban and rural. True, some are more successful than others and there are ups and downs in the life of the SCC. But by and large it has been a movement that has enabled, as one theologian has commented, that the people gathered in the parish church on Sunday come together as the “community of communities”!

The SCC have been a place for deepening faith (through bible study and spiritual reflections), learning from others both old and young, helping one another and the sick, teaching the youth to live more responsibly, helping the elderly and orphans, and dealing with socio-economic problems in the local context. This has meant a greater involvement of the laity and religious in the practical study and proclamation of the Good News. For many, it has meant a first time encounter with the Bible! And it has enabled people to recognise that the riches and responsibilities of the Good News are truly theirs and not simply the preserve of the priests and bishops.

## ***Dialogue***

The greater involvement of the laity and religious in the proclamation of the Good News has enabled greater dialogue between the clergy and the laity since they are all agents of proclamation. Working together entails that they have to meet regularly, plan for parish activities together and share duties that would have been previously exclusively for the clergy. When the Synod first took up the topic of dialogue, it was thought that this only applied to exchanges with persons and institutions that were not Catholic. But it soon emerged that mutual dialogue must first occur within the Catholic Church itself!

In many parts of Africa, there was a tendency to view people from other faiths and religions as a threat in terms of teaching our people heresy and even winning people into their religions. But the Synod has enabled Christians to look at people from other religions as equally God's children, worthy of respect and dignity. Ecumenical services, conferences, joint pastoral letters with other church bodies, seminars and prayer meetings have happened and have removed the fear that people from other faiths and religions are only a threat to us Catholics.

We Christians in Africa still face serious challenges from the spread of Islam. Here in Zambia, the Muslim community is growing. In some countries there has been a distrustful and at times even a violent relationship between Christians and Muslims. That is why good dialogue is so important, for it can enable a peaceful and more cordial existence with people of other faiths.

Another benefit of the dialogue promoted through implementation of the First African Synod is that it has also enabled us to deeply and honestly examine our own faith and the way we express it. This has meant that with openness to others we have come to learn from them about how to express ourselves as God's children in the Catholic Church.

## ***Communications***

Throughout Africa, and certainly here in Zambia, we are experiencing emerging better and faster ways of communication. The use of computers, internet, email, mobile telephones, radio, TV, and cable TV seems to be growing exponentially. For us as Church, this means that we have the means to evangelise the Good News to wider audiences. This can include those with very busy schedules, those too lazy to go to churches, the sick and elderly, and those far from places of worship.

Here in Zambia, the dioceses have established community radio stations that reach out widely to the people. Using local languages and incorporating local music, the programmes are very popular with people. Radio Icengelo, Radio Yatsani and Radio Chikuni were early pioneers and trendsetters in this important work of evangelisation. And we are also seeing new television endeavours with creative work from ZEC's Catholic Media Services and Loyola Productions. The use of these advanced technical communication strategies has lessened an understandable fear that the abuse of these technologies would become more widely accepted than their benefits.

What we are seeing is that new communication strategies have made the Gospel message to be packaged in ways that is suitable and available to most people's lives. This can be especially true in our outreach to the youth. Moreover, communication strategies using stories, proverbs, drama and dance, song, music and art have also been extensively explored. We know that stories and proverbs have become a very popular way of explaining the Word of God in homilies during the Eucharistic celebration.

## **CHALLENGES?**

Yes, overall seen, evangelisation has slowly become ours as we Africans have begun to identify ourselves more and more as Christian and as sons and daughters of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus. This is important when it still can be argued in some circles that this faith of ours is "foreign."

We have indeed seen many successes such as those listed above that have come from the First African Synod.

But don't we know that it often happens that when someone gives you a long list of good things about you, you then wonder whether something will come like, "But on the other hand...!" This can make you feel, "Oh, oh what now?"

Well, to be honest there have been concerns expressed by some Catholics in Africa – church leaders, theologians, ordinary Christians -- that we might not need a Second African Synod when the themes and recommendations of the First African Synod have not yet been fully realised. (Henriot explores some of these concerns in the next essay.)

But let me briefly mention here four of the more obvious challenges that should be faced as we prepare for the Second African Synod.

**First**, the important phrase describing the Church in Africa as the “Family of God,” although very popular across the continent, has still been seen as very vague in content. Just what it means in actual lived reality is often quite unclear. Pope John Paul II in #63 of his apostolic exhortation “The Church in Africa” (*Ecclesia in Africa*) encouraged theologians in Africa to work out the theology of the Church as Family. But isn’t it fair to say that this has not really been done thoroughly or widely disseminated? Although various theological writings have certainly developed since the Synod, often these have been very specific and focused on particular pastoral or moral problems.

Further, a misunderstanding sometimes exists between adapting theology to African cultures or writing a new theology that is typically African. The image of family (as highlighted in “The Church in Africa”) is itself not without fault. We certainly would not want a Church which followed some African models: father as dominant ruler, mother as submissive servant, children as immature followers! Moreover, it might be possible to build a strong family unit (Church) and exclude and disregard all those outside (other religions).

Yes, theologians have the challenge of plenty of good work to do to bring us a good and solid African theology. Theological seminaries, special courses, debates and seminars will hopefully advance this theology, especially if the wide range of Catholic laity and religious are involved.

**Second**, inculturation, while it can be a very popular topic, can sometimes miss out dealing with some key issues. It should not focus primarily on rituals and pastoral responses but must go deeper into theological understandings. For example, what does it mean to say that Jesus is “saviour” of all humankind? And what good things can be drawn from African traditional religions – recognising that God was here on this continent and surely very active before the European missionaries arrived!

Moreover, a good theological background and foundation for the adaptations of many rituals, symbols, dances and drummings may be lacking in some instances. Might there not be the danger at times of turning Eucharistic celebrations into theatrical performances lacking the key theological significance of the Eucharist? Given that culture does evolve, we have the challenge of avoiding simply a tendency to unearth long-gone cultural activities and incorporate them into liturgies and ways of proclaiming the Gospel message. This may be foreign to the current experience of people.

Could we not raise some questions in Zambia, for example, as to whether the *Ubomba* dance is a bit out of the reach for the culture of most Lusaka dwellers? Similarly, the *Ngoni* dance may be equally unlikely for cultural appreciation by Tumbuka Christians in the Eastern Province.

**Third**, dialogue within the Church remains a serious problem in many of our parishes. Some of the clergy still cling to being “boss” of the whole parish with little or no consultation of the parishioners on issues that directly touch the lives of the laity. “I have studied theology for four years, so I know what is best” can be an excuse for not listening to others who may, in fact, know much more about the issues at hand!

The role of women in the Church still remains a disturbing question. Certainly women are of immense help in the practical day-to-day affairs of the Church, but for many their roles may be limited to what they have in their homes (e.g., cleaning, cooking). Do we sufficiently recognise the many gifts a woman can bring to the task of evangelisation? Moreover, the role of religious sisters (nuns) in the Church often remains a problem, given that they have no “real” ecclesial role in liturgy and in the evangelisation mission.

Denying women their full dignity, rights and role in our Church leaves out the key players of evangelisation in families and in society at large.

Dialogue with people of other religions also continues to be a challenge. One wonders whether it is only window dressing to just talk with people of other churches and faiths without really taking them seriously. Do we sometimes expect them to respect our faith without us accepting their faith?

For example, an ordinary Catholic in an ecumenical service might expect that other religions would respect that Jesus is the Son of God, and yet find it very hard to accept that Mohammad is for others the only true prophet of God (Allah). The challenge of interreligious dialogue will, I suspect, be something that grows in the years to come here in Zambia and other parts of Africa.

**Fourth**, given the challenges of HIV and AIDS, poverty, good governance and lack of respect of human rights in Africa, it might be hard to see how our works of justice and peace have really been adequate or effective. Double messages have sometimes been sent when the Church treats its workers badly but demands fair treatment of workers from the government; when the Church remains silent on some ways of preventing or controlling HIV and AIDS but expects an end of the pandemic; when the Church fears

to be political because it might be branded as “partisan”; when Church leaders or ordinary laity back away from strong and prophetic stands on justice and peace for fear of being persecuted or losing reputation or favour.

I guess it is this final challenge that has prompted Pope Benedict XVI to choose “service to reconciliation, justice, and peace” as the theme of the Second African Synod.

## **CONCLUSION**

Of course there are many other challenges that Africa faces and to which the Church must relate. The African Synod comes at a particularly important moment in the history of the Continent. The many *problems* Zambia and other African countries are facing are in the midst of the many *potentials* that the people and the Church have. How to apply the potentials to the problems – that is the task that we face.

What the Second African Synod can help us with, as did the First African Synod, is to see the task as a task of evangelisation. For after all, the Good News – in the fullest and most integral sense -- is the most important contribution that the Catholic Church can make to Africa today and tomorrow.

## **SECOND AFRICAN SYNOD: CHALLENGES AND HOPES FROM A ZAMBIAN PERSPECTIVE**

*Peter Henriot, S.J.*

“Church of Africa: What must you do to be *relevant* and *credible*?”

That challenging question was raised in the midst of discussions during the First African Synod, held in Rome in 1994. And it is surely a question to be raised once again during the current preparations for the Second African Synod, scheduled for September 2009.

On a continent where membership in the Catholic Church is rapidly growing, a Synod looking at the structures and life of the church is surely an important event. Today the annual increase in the number of Catholics is estimated at about 3.1 percent, being greater than the overall growth of the population, estimated at about 2.5 percent. But numbers are by no means the most significant sign of vitality within a church and that is why the deliberations and directions of both the First and Second African Synods are of interest not only on this continent but wider in the Universal Church.

The First African Synod (technically called the “Synod of Bishops: Special Assembly for Africa”) set the pastoral directions for the Catholic Church in Africa under the general heading of “Evangelisation” and covered five key topics: proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace, and communication. Very substantive documents were produced on each of those topics, the results of Bishops’ pre-Synod consultations with their local communities and the exchanges during the session in Rome. Pope John Paul II then followed up with a 1995 document, *The Church in Africa* which gave encouragement to the directions laid out in the Synod documents.

Of the five topics, however, one was particularly central and occupied the attention of bishops in all their considerations. That “justice and peace” would have assumed such a central position is understandable if one recalls that the Synod met in April of 1994, during a period that begun with the tragedy of Rwandan genocide and ending with the miracle of South African elections. In their final document, the bishops described the event as a “Synod of Resurrection and Hope,” emphasising the positive contribution



they wished to make, especially to the challenges of continental justice and peace.

I think it is therefore understandable that the theme of the Second African Synod continues to take up the paramount challenge facing us on the continent: “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace,” with the scriptural theme, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world (Mathew 5: 13-14).”

## **PREPARATION THROUGH THE *LINEAMENTA***

To help prepare for the actual Synod event, the Vatican has circulated a reflection essay with 32 questions for discussion aimed at recommendations. Called the *Lineamenta*, its purpose is to involve members of the Church – hopefully at the level of small Christian communities (SCC) and not simply in diocesan offices or seminaries halls – in identifying major issues that the Synod should grapple with so that the Church might be more “salty” and more “light-filled.”

We are now a little more than a year away from the opening of the Second African Synod. I cannot say how widespread has been the interest in and involvement with the *Lineamenta* across the continent. To be honest, I suspect that the daily demands of facing wars and conflict situations, meeting hunger and poverty demands, struggling with political and economic governance issues, may have distracted a lot of much-needed attention to probing the questions and suggesting the directions that the Synod should take.

## **AMECEA IN ZAMBIA**

In late June and early July of this year (2008), the bishops from the countries of AMECEA (Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa) will gather in Lusaka, Zambia to prepare themselves for effective participation in the Synod. They will devote three days to a study session looking at topics of war and conflicts, church and politics, poverty and justice, role of women, and inculturation and reconciliation.

That Zambia will be hosting the AMECEA session is a happy choice, since this country has been the site of many of the challenges and responses, both social and ecclesial, that the Church in Africa has gone through since the end of the 1994 Synod. Zambia is one of the richest countries in Africa with some of the poorest people in the world. Rich in abundant resources

of land, water, agriculture, minerals, and tourist places, but poor in human development with a rank of 165 out of 177 on the UNDP “Human Development Index.”

But Zambia has been blessed with 44 years of independence without any war or serious ethnic conflict. Seventy-two tribes living together as our founder, Kenneth Kaunda, frequently exclaimed, “One Zambia, One Nation!” to stress this unity. Host of millions of refugees from surrounding countries, Zambia has not experienced the tragic dynamics that cause people to flee their homes. In many ways, we are the envy of our neighbours!

And the Church in Zambia has made a strong effort to live up to the high calls of the First African Synod. The pastoral centre of church activities, the small Christian communities, are mixed in the quality of their structures and practices. But by and large they have a life that does contribute to a goal that has been described as realised when the Sunday gathering in a parish is really a gathering of “the community of communities.” Seminaries and convents are full, lay groups are many and active, liturgies and some theological thinking incorporates efforts at authentic inculturation, and justice and peace activities are prominent and effective.

But Zambia, as the rest of the AMECEA countries, and, indeed, the rest of all the African countries, still has a long ways to go toward the ideal of a Church that is, in the vision of the First Synod, the “Family of God.” (This is explained in Dominic Liche’s paper in this JCTR booklet.) That is why the Second African Synod can be so very important for the future of the Church on the continent. And given Africa’s potential in the worldwide church, this Synod can be a landmark moment for the entire Catholic Church.

## **SOME CRITICISMS**

Before going into some of the issues and hopes that are leading us into the Second Synod, I believe it is helpful to take an honest look at some critiques raised by a few African theologians about the Synod process and content.

After all, it is primarily for Africans to raise the most important issues surrounding the coming Synod.

There is a feeling among many Africans that another Synod is not what is needed at this moment in our history. Rather, what is needed is a more coordinated and committed effort to implement the good directions of the First Synod. Expressing this view in the Ugandan popular Catholic magazine, *Leadership*, a year ago, one writer has said that that “our problem is not the

lack of solutions but the will to effectively disseminate and implement findings.” Why move on to yet another full agenda when we haven’t yet realised the tasks set down earlier?

Moreover, this writer comments, while it is good to see the Synod taking an *outward* look (reconciliation, peace and justice), it is not good if key *internal* issues are ignored such as “questions of doctrine, discipline, or liturgical practice.” Examples of this would be priestly formation that ensures that new priests have fully integrated the spiritual and disciplinary requirements of their office (e.g., faithful and joyful living of celibacy), inculturation of faith in liturgical practices and facing up to the challenge from Pentecostals and other evangelical sects.

Another writer, expressing his views a few months ago in the premier African theological journal, *AFER (African Theological Review)*, challenges the view that the First Synod has been really implemented let alone even widely known. And he critiques the *Lineamenta’s* orientation for lacking a contextualised foundation. For example, there are dozens more of references to various Vatican sources than to actual African Church sources. Women’s voices are clearly lacking and the experience of suffering from conflicts and oppression find little resonance in the analysis and the questions raised for discussion.

The *AFER* writer is bold enough to put into print the view held by many that “The fact is that as with some painful past evils some of the present-day evils, even in Africa, the Church as institution, the Church as community bears some degree of guilt....If the Church is really serious about overcoming evil through reconciliation, then it must move beyond what is comfortable for the stakeholders.”

Personally, even though his critique is quite sharp, I do not find it distorted or unhelpful. He shows in his overall approach that he simply wants to move the discussion forward in an honest and humble fashion.

But even given some serious criticisms of the *Lineamenta*, I believe that the general orientation of the document and the specific fact of another African Synod do indeed offer much hope for a Catholic Church on this continent that can be both relevant and credible. I say that because there is a recognition in the document that the situations sadly described in 1994 in *The Church in Africa* have in many instances worsened, with heightened instances of conflicts, poverty, HIV and AIDS, and environmental threats (#8).

Here in Zambia, we like to say that “the *potentials* outweigh the *problems*,” that there is a more positive side to the state of affairs than is frequently reported or commented on in negative views from outside the country. The Second African Synod offers the chance, in its preparation, discussion and implementation, for more concerted efforts, within and outside the continent, to apply the potentials to the problems!

## **LIBERATION THAT HEALS**

In a study-guide prepared by the Zambian Bishops’ Conference for use in small Christian communities, the task of reconciliation and healing is linked to Jesus’ example of ministry as a healer. But this healing must be seen in its *social* as well as *personal* context. And this requires liberation. As the study-guide states (taking an agenda from #74 of the *Lineamenta*):

“Christ sends us to save and heal others through:

- Liberation from war and violence,
- Liberation from poverty, hunger and sickness,
- Liberation from tribalism, injustices and corruption of all kinds,
- Liberation from witchcraft and sorcery.”

Even if in Zambia we are presently not experiencing the “war and violence” of other African states in the AMECEA region (one need only recall the sad reports coming daily from Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan), we know from the church’s social teaching that *peace is not simply the absence of conflict but the presence of justice*. And so our church needs to be in the forefront of promoting the social justice that provides a foundation for peace.

One thinks simply of the new “prosperity” being felt in Zambia because of the greatly increased price of our major export, copper. But that “prosperity” is being measured only in terms of “economic indicators” of GDP growth, inflation rates, new investments, etc. The “social indicators” of life expectancy, literacy, housing, environmental sustainability, etc., are ignored. But a church “in service to reconciliation” cannot ignore the growing gap between rich and poor if it wants to promote the conditions for true and lasting peace.

The mention of sickness immediately raises the issue of HIV and AIDS. Zambia is one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic (16% between 15 and 49 *infected*; 100% of all ages *affected*!). But we are increasingly becoming aware that the challenge to meet HIV and AIDS is not primarily

a *medical-pharmaceutical* issue on the one hand (e.g., more ARVs) or a *behavioral change* approach on the other hand (e.g., fewer condoms). No, it is primarily a *development and social justice* issue. This includes then the issues of education, health services, status of women, non-discrimination (no stigma!), political decision-making structures, housing, environment, water and sanitation, employment, recreation facilities, etc. The Church must speak out and promote this more holistic approach to meeting the HIV and AIDS crisis.

“Liberation from tribalism, injustices and corruption of all kinds” is a big agenda item for social action by the Church and by all our justice and peace agencies, from local parish committees to national episcopal commissions. But it seems to me that a church response must take seriously the teaching of the 1971 Synod of Bishops’ statement on “Justice in the World,” which made clear that *those who would speak justice to others must first be just themselves*. The Second African Synod needs to encourage an agenda of ecclesial reform where necessary so that the Church can indeed be “salt and light” in its personality and practice.

Finally, the *Lineamenta* makes clear that violence has a significant *cultural* element (#76). The creation of a culture of peace requires that the Church deal straight on with cultural elements of witchcraft and sorcery. In Zambia in recent years the damaging presence of these elements has been seen in the fascination in and response to “satanism” – not always, in my opinion, on the soundest of theological and pastoral grounds . What might seem to some to be a side issue in the great agenda of the Second African Synod is in reality a genuine threat to the response by a Church that wants to be called the “Family of God.”

## **GROUND FOR HOPE**

In conclusion, I can offer one solid ground for hope in a Second African Synod that will effectively promote reconciliation, justice and peace in continuity with the agenda of the First African Synod.

This hope comes from the recognition of the *spiritual power of the laity*. For many reasons, the Catholic Church in Africa – at least in that part of Africa that I daily experience, Zambia – is a Church of the laity. The power of laity and lay movements is acknowledged in the concluding chapter of the *Lineamenta* (#91), with their solid formation emphasised earlier in the document (#s 60 and 65-66). This formation is to be particularly strong in the church’s social teaching (CST).

It is indeed encouraging to note the commitment of lay persons – often women – to the “full Gospel” mission of the Church. I say “full Gospel” mission because I do not accept a dualistic division between spiritual growth and material development. The *Lineamenta* makes that mission explicit for me when it says this means “working for the coming of the Kingdom of God and contributing to the coming of a new Africa so that, with the help of God’s grace, justice, peace and the common good of people and nations will always prevail” (#92).

Will the Second African Synod move the Church to be “*relevant* and *credible*” in the days ahead, in its mission of being in service to reconciliation, justice and peace? *Relevant* in touching the lives of the people, *credible* in coming from an institution that practices what it preaches, that “walks the talk.”

Despite the very challenging and legitimate critiques that surround the *Lineamenta* and the whole idea of another Synod at this time, I believe that ultimately there is hope for the Church in Africa. The richest resource Zambia and all of Africa have to offer is the faith of the people – a faith filled with ambiguities and contradictions, but a growing faith, a maturing faith. With God’s help, I believe we are set for another “Synod of Resurrection and Hope.”

# AMECEA AND THE SECOND AFRICAN SYNOD

*Peter Henriot, S.J.*

“The Bishops of AMECEA were the best prepared for the First African Synod in 1994! They knew about the issues, they came prepared with documents representing the people’s views, and they spoke eloquently and convincingly.”

That very complimentary and a bit biased opinion is something I’ve heard several times and I must admit that it sounds like it might even be true! Well, I leave it to others to judge the compliment and evaluate the bias. But I take it as a challenge for the Bishops of AMECEA as the Second African Synod now looms ahead in 2009. And in the next several months, the Bishops – and the people – of the AMECA region will have an opportunity to really prepare very well once again for this very important meeting.

In late June and early July of this year, over two hundred Bishops and their advisors will gather in Lusaka for an AMECEA study workshop and business session. The theme of the meeting will be taken from the theme of the Second African Synod, “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” The sub-title of the theme is the beautiful scriptural passage, “You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14).

What does it mean to be the salt of the African earth today, an earth full of riches and potentials, but an earth pounded down by poverty, wars and disease? What does it mean to be the light of the African world today, a world of increasingly mature Christian faith, but a world of ethnic divisions and occasional superficiality? These are questions that the Bishops of AMECEA needs to look at very seriously if they are to go to the Synod in Rome in 2009 with the same spiritual strength and intellectual vigour that their predecessors went to the 1994 Synod.

The AMECEA study session in Lusaka will look at three key questions: what has happened in the African Church since 1994, what are the new issues facing the Church today, and what questions for the future need to be honestly faced? In this article, I want to suggest some of the issues that arise in considering these questions.

## SINCE 1994

The discussions and resolutions of the gathering of Bishops in April and May 1994 in Rome, and the explanations and recommendations of Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, "The Church in Africa" (*Ecclesia in Africa*) of September 1995, really set the pastoral tone and priorities for the Catholic community throughout the continent into the new millennium. Under the general theme of "Evangelisation," the Synod explored topics of proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace, and communication.

The theological vision inspiring the pastoral tone and priorities was captured with the descriptive phrase for the Church in Africa as "The Family of God." (In his essay in this JCTR booklet, Dominic Liche looks at that model of Church)

Understandably, a major focus of discussion and recommendation during the Synod was on peace and justice. April and May 1994 were times of the tragic genocide in Rwanda and the hopeful miracle of electoral victory for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. One participant at the Synod put the very challenging question, "Church of Africa, what must we do to be *relevant* and *credible*?"

The Church's *relevancy* and *credibility* has surely been tested since the First African Synod met in the mid-1990s. The AMECEA workshop in Lusaka will have to honestly assess whether the Church has indeed been relevant and credible in our task of integral evangelisation. The AMECEA Churches of Zambia and Malawi, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti are all challenged in so many ways to be signs of hope and promoters of love.

Since 1994, the Horn of Africa has seen on-going wars, Uganda and Kenya have been rocked with dreadful conflicts, and peaceful nations like Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia have struggled with economic reforms that often have lacked a human face. While we rightly thank God that our seminaries and convents may be full, the depth of a faithful commitment is always something to diligently work on. Yes, there is more self-reliance and self-sustainability experienced in our churches. But do we not still have a long way to go before authentic movement from "missionary church" to "church in mission" is experienced?

In some senses, it might be difficult to assert that the papal document "The Church in Africa" has since 1994 really made a significant difference in the



faith-life of our small Christian communities, in the catechesis of both children and adults, in the prayerful celebration of liturgies, in the spiritual depth of families. To be honest, I think we still have a long ways to go before being able to acclaim that the Catholic Church in Africa is “genuinely Christian and authentically African” – the simplest definition of *inculturation* that I know of!

Yes, justice and peace has probably moved more centrally into the pastoral mission of the AMECEA churches. Yes, Bishops’ pastoral letters have addressed conflict and corruption, national offices have educated about elections and budgets, and local grass-roots communities have challenged their governmental officials to be more responsible.

## **NEW ISSUES**

There are certainly new issues that the Second African Synod will have to deal with. Perhaps some were dealt with in the First African Synod, but they have taken on new dimensions in the years since then. Here are five key topics to be considered.

First, a very big challenge for AMECEA -- both in the Lusaka study session in June and in the months ahead -- will be to accept the challenge of *accountability and transparency* (to use two of the favourite buzzwords of the day!) in all our church affairs. We all recall that strong teaching from the 1971 Synod of Bishops that reminded us that those who would speak justice to others must be just themselves!

Here in Zambia we have had powerful cooperation with the other churches in a variety of justice and peace issues. This has been especially true in recent months with the struggle to get a good people-centred and people-adopted new Constitution with a new Bill of Rights that has been up-dated to include economic, social and cultural rights. But we still have a ways to go before we can say that mechanisms of participation, guarantee of rights and openness of decision-making are fully adopted in our Church.

A second issue to face is the effective and equitable response to the *HIV and AIDS pandemic*. As I emphasised in the previous article in this JCTR booklet, we as Church must promote a more holistic approach to meeting the many challenges that the HIV and AIDS crisis presents us with. Simple medical or moralistic responses will not make a difference in a context that is profoundly filled with concerns of development and justice.

Related to this, of course, is a third issue deserving of more attention than it is getting in our churches. That is the issue of *women* and the many *gender-based* questions. Isn't it true to say that gender questions have not adequately and honestly been dealt with in the Catholic Church? You don't immediately have to think of the controversial issue of ordination of women (although this may need more serious consideration if we are to continue to be a Eucharist-based community). But the more common day-to-day set of issues that we should not ignore consist of the inclusion of women in decision-making within the church, promotion of the education of the girl child, strong campaigns against abuse of women, and full teaching of the equal dignity of women in sermons, catechetical training and small Christian community discussions.

A fourth topic that is a bit new in context and implementation (even though around for a long time) is the meaning of *integral and sustainable development* in the midst of rapid economic growth. Zambia received the Synod documents in the mid-1990s at a time when we were in the midst of a drastic "Structural Adjustment Programme" that was really hurting the majority poor in the country. Now we are in a "turn around" period with new investments (especially in our copper mines), greater GDP growth rates, lower inflation, etc.

But as all the economic indicators look good, our social indicators – how the people are actually doing, how the environment is faring – don't look good! Poverty is still a scandal and an offense against the image of God in our midst. So the church's social teaching on development (e.g., Paul VI's magnificent *Progress of Peoples*, 1967) needs to be more widely known and practised. Development, stated the Pope, is the movement from less human conditions to more human conditions. That is certainly more than economic growth!

A fifth issue that is really central in so many of the AMECEA countries is *peace and conflict prevention and resolution*. Thank God, Zambia has enjoyed 44 years of Independence as "One Zambia, One Nation! – without war or serious ethnic conflict. But other AMECEA countries have not been so blessed. Therefore there must be focus on ways to promote genuine and lasting peace, built on justice and development. Since the First Africa Synod, several years ago, new and creative efforts have been developed in AMECEA countries about peace education, conflict reconciliation, anti-gun campaigns, etc.

If the Church in Africa is to be relevant and credible, these and many other

social, economic, political and spiritual issues have to be dealt with in a spirit of reconciliation, justice and peace.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In conclusion, we pose a number of questions for the future that must be honestly faced when preparing for the Second African Synod. These are questions that come out of the *Lineamenta* and especially from the theme “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.” They force us to ask if we are really “salt of the earth, light of the world” and challenge us also to reflect on the First African Synod.

1. What are the lessons learned from the deliberations of the First African Synod, both in its preparation and implementation, in the lives of particular Churches in Africa and the peoples of the continent?
  2. Does the model of “Church as Family of God” still stand relevant in Africa today?
  3. What good things have you seen since the First African Synod in relation to reconciliation, justice, and peace?
  4. What difficulties and challenges does the Church in Africa face in politics, social needs, economics, and religion?
  5. How does faith in your community impact on the lives of people faced with these difficulties?
  6. Is the Church’s Social Teaching (church teaching on issues like human rights, justice, dignity of work, etc.) sufficiently known in your particular Church? Are there any initiatives for disseminating it and making it better known? What are they?
  7. Is the majority of Catholic faithful really convinced that peace and justice are *integral* to the evangelisation mission of the Church? Why or why not?
  8. Does the Church clearly and fearlessly exercise its prophetic voice by speaking out for reconciliation in the service of reconciliation, justice and peace? Why or why not?
  9. Is the infrastructure of the Church – leadership, offices, commissions, assignments, education, etc. – adequate to respond effectively to this mission that will be re-enforced by the Second African Synod meeting in 2009? Why or why not?
- Do you have any big hopes of what might come about in the Church in your community because of the Second African Synod?

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