

ZAMBIA'S CHURCH TOWARD THE YEAR 2000

The Catholic Church in Africa has been given a profound challenge for moving into the Third Millennium. This challenge has come from the African Synod and is expressed by the question raised by one of the Synod leaders: "Church in Africa, what do you need to do in order to make your message relevant, credible and effective?"

The African Synod ("Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops") is in reality a *three-staged process*. The first stage was the preparatory period begun in 1989, which included wide-spread consultation from grass-root levels of small Christian communities all the way up to national and regional episcopal conferences. This stage produced observations and recommendations on the general theme of evangelisation and on the five specific topics of proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace, and communication.

The second stage was the actual meeting of the Synod in Rome, when 250 bishops gathered from all around Africa and from outside the continent, meeting in the presence of Pope John Paul II. This occurred in April 1994 and produced lively exchanges and far-reaching propositions touching on all aspects of the church's life in Africa.

The third stage is the implementation currently going on throughout Africa, urged forward by the visit to several African countries of John Paul II in September 1995 and the publication of his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Church In Africa*. Throughout the continent, the church is organising its pastoral activities in dioceses, parishes and communities according to the directions of the Synod.

ZAMBIA AS A CASE STUDY

In many ways, Zambia offers a clear case study for what is happening on the African continent in society at large and within the church. The country itself, a former British colony that attained independence in 1964, is undergoing tremendous change as it struggles to make multi-party democracy work amidst severe economic hardships. The twin movements of the 1990's in Africa are the structural transitions to *political democratisation* and *economic liberalisation*.

Zambia was ruled from 1964 to 1991 by the leader of its independence struggle, Kenneth Kaunda. His one-party authoritarian regime was put out of power in multi-party elections that boasted of "setting a standard for Africa" in terms of being free, fair and peaceful. But the new government, headed by Frederick Chiluba, has had its difficulties of corruption and division. In the 1996 elections, Kaunda is being excluded from running again by a highly controversial constitutional amendment. The free press is under threat and many of the leaders in power exercise arbitrary force to maintain their positions.

The struggle for democracy in Zambia illustrates well the problem faced in other African countries undergoing political change. Democracy is not simply a set of *structures* (e.g., written constitution, opposition parties, independent judiciary, free press, etc.) but also a set of *attitudes* (respect of human rights, tolerance, accountability, commitment to common good, etc.). What has occurred in recent years has been a transition to democratic structures without a parallel transition to democratic attitudes.

Politics of course are influenced by economics, and Zambia again offers an example of what is happening in Africa today. Under the previous regime, the government controlled over 80% of the economic activity of the country. Because of internal problems of corruption and misplaced priorities, and external problems of collapse of export commodity prices (copper) and rapidly escalating debt, the economy of Zambia was bankrupt by 1991. The new government rejected the socialist control-economy and embraced a neo-liberal model of free market economy under the guidance of a structural adjustment programme (SAP) imposed by the World Bank and IMF.

The SAP is a programme designed to *stabilise* the economy through monetary and budget measures (e.g., devaluation, retrenchment of civil service, and curtailment of social services) and to *restructure* the economy through market and trade measures (e.g., removal of subsidies, privatisation of government companies, and abolishing tariffs). This programme has been enforced throughout Africa, but with questionable results. It is more of a *fiscal-management* approach than a *development* approach and very important long-term measures are not emphasised (e.g., employment generation, regional cooperation, environmental concerns).

In the short term, SAP has very bad social effects because the measures hurt those who allude are suffering greatly, the poor. In Zambia the World Bank has estimated that over 70% of the people are below the poverty line. Removal of subsidies on basic commodities, rising prices for all goods, imposition of fees for education and health care, reduction of the formal employment sector: these and other approaches especially affect the poor. As a result, Zambia and many other African countries are experiencing a decline in basic social indicators of well-being. For example, life expectancy at the time of Independence (1964) was 42 years; in 1984 it was 54 years; but by 1994 it has dropped to 44 years.

Zambia also suffers from other problems faced by many African states: drought during several of the past years; serious increase in AIDS, affecting especially those who are educated and in positions of leadership; and demands of external debt. With a population of 8.5 million people, Zambia has one of the highest per-capita debts in the world, owing close to US\$6.5 billion.

RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

The church in Africa is moving from being a "missionary church" to a "church in mission." The fastest growing population of Christians in the world is on the African continent. For the Catholic church, there are many problems to be faced in Africa (e.g., depth of religious commitment, availability of effective ministers, etc.) . But these are the problems of growth, youth and vitality, not the problems of decline and tiredness experienced elsewhere in developed countries.

"Integral evangelisation" is the challenge of the African church, as an effort is made to build authentic African communities according to the guidelines of the African Synod. This includes proclaiming clearly the Gospel and putting the faith into practice in the areas of development, justice and peace. The church in Zambia responds to its context in the light of the African Synod by addressing the following issues:

1. *Small Christian Communities (SCCs)*: this pastoral approach of the church encourages local gatherings that reflect on the scripture, prepare people for the sacraments, and cooperate to meet social and economic needs of the community. Leadership of these communities include both women and men, but more effective training of these leaders is needed.

The strength of the SCCs in Zambia varies from diocese to diocese, but overall there is clear commitment to promote this pastoral approach. It is here that the model of church emphasised at the African Synod takes shape: "church as family of God."

2. *Ministry*: the church is really a "church of the laity" in terms of responsibilities. The number of ordained ministers -- although increasing rapidly each year -- can not adequately meet the pastoral demands of the growing numbers of Christians. With a male, celibate clergy only, Eucharistic celebrations are available to a smaller and smaller percentage of Catholics.

Catechists, leaders of SCCs, professional people in government and business, heads of families, ordinary workers: all of these lay people have key roles to play in the church's evangelisation work. In Zambia, the National Council of laity emphasises the "church as family" model and the ministry consequences of this model.

3. *Inculturation*: the challenge facing the church here is to make the faith deeply Christian and authentically African. Inculturation means not only adaptations in the liturgy but also new theological expressions and structures of governance. While cultural traditions must be respected, those that are contrary to Gospel values must be questioned, e.g., treatment of women, witchcraft, etc.

Several centres of research have been set up by church groups in Zambia to explore more deeply the cultural traditions and practices of the people. The aim of inculturation is to enable Zambians to "feel at home" in their church.

4. *Dialogue*: respectful exchanges with other churches and with other religions is a task for the Catholic communities. Dialogue with African traditional religion and with Islam is a particularly important effort. This requires study, patience, tolerance and cooperation.

There are very good ecumenical relationships in Zambia with the main Protestant churches, but more strained relationships with evangelical sects and "Born Again" groups. This is especially true because the current government has proclaimed Zambia a "Christian nation" with strong support from evangelical groups that have a more narrow political agenda.

5. *Development*: the poverty situations in Africa cry out for response. Since the early missionary days, the church has assisted in the areas of health care, education, skills training, and relief efforts. This has continued to today, but now the challenge is to promote sustainable human development in ways that do not create dependency on outside sources.

One of the strong development programmes emphasised by the church in Zambia is "training for transformation." This is based on Paulo Friere's approach to "conscientisation," organising people to identify their needs and respond in a self-reliant

way through community organisation. This programme is effective among both rural and urban people and also among various groups such as teachers and health care workers.

6. *Justice and peace*: this is the topic that received the most attention at the African Synod. During the meeting in Rome, the hopeful situation of the democratic transition in South Africa contrasted with the tragedy of genocide in Rwanda. The church in many parts of Africa has played a major role in challenging governments, promoting human rights, protecting refugees, and encouraging democracy. There is great need to help Christians understand the social teaching of the church and their political responsibilities, and also to have the church witness in its own life to the justice it proclaims.

The Zambian Bishops Conference has established a Justice and Peace Commission at the national level and local committees in parishes throughout the country. In a series of pastoral letters over the past decade, the Bishops have spoken out for justice in politics, in the economic programmes, in family and for women, and in other key areas. In the past year, the government has criticised the church for its stands but the bishops have held firm in their teaching.

EXPECTATIONS OF JAPAN'S CHURCH FROM AFRICA

In an increasingly interdependent world, the links between rich developed countries like Japan and the poor developing countries of Africa are important not just at the level of governments but also at the level of people and people's organisations. Japanese church leaders and groups can contribute in a variety of ways to the African church's movement into the 21st Century.

1. *Do not forget Africa*: Because of so many problems in Africa today, there is a tendency in richer countries to ignore the continent or to think of it only in terms of disasters. But Africa is a land of great potentials and promises, in both human and natural resources. It should not be neglected or dismissed as hopeless. Although the people of Japan will naturally pay more attention to Asia, it is important that Christians keep a wider vision of humanity and hence pay attention to what is happening in Africa. Promotion of fairer media coverage of Africa is one example of encouraging greater respect for the people of this continent.

2. *Learn from Africa*: The vitality of the church in Africa has much to teach non-Africans, just as Africa has much to learn from the rest of the world, including Japan. This is especially true in the area of inculturation and theology, as the Christian church both in Japan and in the countries of Africa strive to remove overly-dominant Western influences in the expression and practice of their following of Jesus Christ. Exchanges among theologians and lay leaders of Christian communities can advance mutual interests.

3. *Provide help for Africa*: In its development process over the next few decades, African countries will still have to rely on outside assistance. This should be done in a way that is particularly sensitive to promoting self-reliance and avoiding dependency. Japan has been a major contributor of foreign aid to many African countries, including Zambia. The Japanese public should be made aware of this fact and should in turn monitor the effectiveness of the programmes and their relationship to the democratic climate in Africa.

4. *Work for justice*: Africans must bear the greatest responsibility for their own development. But as the African Synod stressed, there are international structures that impede better development, including trade and investment patterns, military arms sales, and debt burdens. The Christians in Japan should hear the cry of the African church leaders who have pleaded, for example, for better terms of trade and for forgiveness of debt. This is an area for greater cooperation between justice and peace groups in both Japan and Africa.

CONCLUSION

Recently Africa has been referred to as the "lost continent" or the "forgotten continent." But the peoples of Africa are not lost and they should not be forgotten! As has been explained in this article, Zambia offers a good case study of both the problems and the promises of Africa. That is why the message of John Paul II after the African Synod finds strong echoes in the experience of the Zambian church. It is hoped that this message may also find echoes in the Japanese church:

"The church has the duty to affirm vigorously that the difficulties which many parts of Africa experience can be overcome. The church must strengthen in all Africans the hope of genuine liberation. In the end, this confidence is based on the church's awareness of God's promise. God assures us that history is not closed in upon itself but is open to God's Kingdom. This is why there is no justification for despair or pessimism when we think about the future of Africa and any other part of the world." [*The Church in Africa*, #14]

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