



## **II Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops** **4-25 October 2009**

One could argue that the Synod has come and gone. In one respect it has, but in another respect the work of the Synod is only beginning. One must remember that the gathering in Rome, impressive as it was, with 33 Cardinals, 75 Archbishops, 120 Bishops, 8 Religious, 49 Auditors and 29 Experts, 306 in all or 307 if you count the Holy Father; was part of a much larger process. The process began on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2004, when the then Pope John Paul II announced his intention to convoke a Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. One must point out that this was not an African Synod but rather the Universal Church focusing on the Church in Africa. This is important because many of the problems facing the continent, and there are many, find their solutions in the corridors of power in the countries of the North and the West and therefore it will take the might of the Universal Church working together to address these issues. There had been a national consultation in each country prior to the Synod, where the burning issues of the continent were enumerated. These were collated and put into a working document for the Synod Fathers.

The opening Mass which took place in the splendor of St. Peter's Basilica set the tone for the Synod. The Holy Father made it clear that Africa is a challenge: "When we speak of the treasures of Africa, our thoughts immediately turn to the resources its land is rich in and that, unfortunately, have become and often continue to be a reason for exploitation, conflict and corruption. Without entering into the merit of the origins of such sickness of the spirit, there is absolutely no doubt that the so-called 'First' world has exported up to now and continues to export its spiritual toxic waste that contaminates the peoples of other continents, in particular those of Africa."

Each participant could make a personal intervention (5 minutes for Cardinals and Bishops and 4 for Auditors). About 230 interventions were made in the first week on all possible issues. However, the focus and theme of the Synod was not lost. These short interventions spoke to the theme of: Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, the Church, Light up the World and Salt of the Earth.

Cardinal Turkson from Ghana and his team had the dubious task of putting what was said by the 218 into some kind of coherent order. The result highlights the challenges facing the continent, stressing "human hearts are the ultimate hiding place for causes of everything destabilizing the African continent." It was clear that the Synod was pushing the more restorative model of justice, rather than the retributive justice model as the way to enhance the work of reconciliation, justice and peace.

The second and third week mainly comprised of group work with 12 working groups of some 25-30 people. They had two goals. One was to produce 'A Message' that the Synod Fathers would bring home with them. The second goal was to suggest propositions to the Holy Father, which would be used in compiling the Apostolic Exhortation, which is the final word in the Synod process and which will only be published in a year and a half's

time. A special sub-committee of 15 members, 12 of whom were elected by the Assembly and 3 of whom were selected by the Holy Father, will oversee this task.

What was interesting to note was that there was no conservative, liberal, or progressive groupings. Everybody was on the same page, united as they were in experiences of poverty, misery, exploitation, conflict, hunger, corruption and a devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic. What was passionate for one Bishop resonated with many others. There was also a very strong feeling that the Church must become much more an agent of reconciliation, justice and peace and here the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church was very much pushed. There was also a feeling that this was a Synod that was looking out at the harsh reality of the African continent and in no way was it an internal audit of where we are as the Church in Africa.

The final Message was very hard-hitting and was written in very blunt language. For example, The Message states “A change is called for with regard to the burden of debt against poor nations, which literally kills children. Multinationals have to stop their criminal devastation of the environment in their greedy exploitation of natural resources. It is a shortsighted policy to foment wars in order to make fast gains from chaos, at the cost of human lives and blood.” This, for me, was saying it as it is with no nuances and it was very much what the African Bishops wanted. They felt proud of The Message they were bringing home to their people.

There were 57 propositions in all. These can be basically broken down into 4 main categories:

- a) *The Spirituality and Theology of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*: If the Church was to seriously engage in these issues then it would need to be sustained by a serious spirituality and guided by a sound theological mandate.
- b) *Reaching Out*: Clearly the Synod Fathers saw the need to reach out to other people of good will on the continent and to unite with them in the struggle for greater reconciliation, justice and peace.
- c) *People*: A number of propositions highlight specifically the people who will be in the final analysis the implementers of the outcome of the Synod and include all groups within our Church, from Bishops to children and everyone in between.
- d) *Issues*: These propositions centered around the socio-economic, political and moral issues facing the people and Church in Africa; these are issues that need to be addressed if the plight of so many people is to be improved.

The real work now begins. The Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference in their January 2010 Plenary will decide what focus they wish to bring to this region. The call is for Africa, to rise up, to take up your pallet and walk!

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November 2009