

Prophetic role of the Church in African Society.

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Introduction

Over the past week I have been present at the 2nd Special Assembly of Africa of the Synod of Bishops, titled:

“The Church in Africa in Service to reconciliation, Justice and peace.

You are salt of the earth....

You are the light of the world” (Mt. 5 13,14)

Having listened to Interventions from different parts of the continent I realise how all embracing the theme of this morning’s session is. The diversity of the challenges faced by many Catholic communities makes it difficult to list all the different Prophetic roles that the Church must try to fulfil on the Continent of Africa today. The prophetic witness of those living in North Africa is different from those who live in sub Saharan Africa. The differences and challenges in sub Saharan Africa are also quite significant depending on whether one is speaking of East, West or Southern Africa.

Africa is a continent of great variety and diversity of situations of both Church and Society. We must be cautious about generalizations both in the diagnosis of problems and issues and in the suggestion of solutions. The local particular Churches must take responsibility for their own concrete existence addressing situations that call for a prophetic response according to local circumstances.

When I speak of prophecy, I use the term as it is generally understood from the writings of the prophets in the Old Testament – the one who announces and denounces, the person who is a spokesperson for Yahweh.

I also draw from advice that St. Paul gives in the Letter to the Corinthians, when he advises that prophets should be those who “build up, give encouragement and reassurance” (1 Cor 14:3).

I propose to speak about two forms of prophetic witness;

1. The first is the group of people of Africa who have given their lives for the sake of the Gospel. In the document: "Ecclesia in Africa" # 33,34, Pope John Paul II, speaks about the heroic women and men who are the modern day martyrs of Africa. Since that time many more names have been added to the list, some of these are people from our Institutes and Congregations whom many of you here present in this Aula will have known and worked with.
2. The second form of prophetic witness concerns the role of the Church and, in particular, Religious and Missionary Institutes in giving Prophetic witness in the context of Africa today.

Personal Testimony

The Synod has now completed the first week of work and a striking aspect of the week has been the different number of personal Prophetic testimonies from the participants in the Synod Hall. The Archbishop of Bukavu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo spoke about recent atrocities in his diocese where religious have been targeted and killed. He has now left Rome to return to his Diocese.

There were examples of what can only be described as heroic acts of forgiveness on the part of those who suffered terribly during the appalling killings of countless thousands in Rwanda. I would like to reference here Sr. Geneviève Uwamariya of the Sisters of Namur (Rwanda). Even though the passage is long I think it is worthwhile to quote it in full: In her own words: *"I am a survivor of the Tutsi genocide in 1994. Most members of my family were massacred in our local parish church. The sight of this building filled me with horror and rebellion, and so also, when I meet with detainees who filled me with disgust and rage.*

In this state of mind something happened that changed my life. On the 27th August 1997, at 13.00hrs, a group of women from the association "Women of Divine Mercy" brought me to two prisons near Kigali, my native city. They had gone there to prepare the detainees for the Jubilee Year of 2000. They said, "If you have killed, you must ask pardon of the surviving victims, with this you will be freed from the burden of vendetta, of hate and resentment. If you are a victim you are obliged to offer your forgiveness to the person who has wronged you, so you will him to be free of the burden of his crime and the evil that is in him.

This message had an extraordinary effect on me. One person hearing this, stood up in tears, fell on his knees before me and begged me saying in a loud voice: "Mercy", I was frozen to the spot recognising a friend of my family who had grown up with us and had shared everything with us.

He admitted that it was he who killed my father and described in detail the death of my loved ones.. A feeling of pity and compassion overcame me, I lifted him up, I embraced him, and sobbing said to him, you are and will always be my brother". At that moment I felt as if a weight had been lifted from me. I found again interior peace and I thanked the person who was still in my arms. To my great surprise, I heard him shout "Justice can follow its course and condemn me to death, now I am free!"

I also wished to shout to anyone who would listen to me: come and see what has freed me, you, too, can find internal peace. From that moment my mission has been to cover many kilometres to bring letters from detainees who ask forgiveness from survivors. In this way over 500 letters were distributed while I also brought back the replies from the survivors to the detainees who had become once again my friends and my brothers..this facilitated meetings between executioners and victims. There have been many concrete gestures that have marked reconciliation: a village for widows and orphans of the genocide has been built by detainees; as indeed the monument in front of the church at Kibuye. In different villages associations of ex detainees and survivors have been set up and the work very well.

From this experience I deduce that reconciliation is not just the wish to bring together two people or two groups in conflict. Rather we are talking about putting everyone under love and let the internal healing come which brings reciprocal liberation. This is the importance for the Church in our land, given that she has as her mission to offer the Word, a word that heals, frees and reconciles” healing come”. (Intervention, Synod of Bishops, 2009)

I offer two further specific witnesses of courageous action, for the sake of the Gospel, from two different parts of the Continent:

Profiles in Courage

1. The Courage of an Archbishop

I refer to Archbishop Michael Francis, Archbishop of Monrovia, Liberia, who has courageously spoken out against one dictator after another in this small West African Republic as it descended into chaos and disorder. He truly became the “voice of the voiceless” the only one listened to as he denounced each atrocity without fear. Then as peace came to the country he was struck down by a stroke and remains to this day, almost completely paralysed. The Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf described him, when speaking in the cathedral in Monrovia, on the occasion to mark the Centenary of the establishment of the Catholic Church in Liberia, as “the voice of the nation”. A voice that was silenced through ill health and which never hesitated to speak out forcefully against dictators and abusers of human rights of the people of Liberia.

2. The courage of a Christian man prophetically denouncing witchcraft.

Servant of God Benedict Daswa , Dioceses of Tzaneen, South Africa
He was "killed just 19 years ago" but his cause "has recently been completed in its diocesan phase".

Benedict grew up in a traditional family that belonged to the small tribe of the Lemba, who live mainly in the town of Venda, in the province of Limpopo. He converted to Catholicism while studying to be a schoolteacher.

Benedict soon realized that witchcraft went against the Catholic faith. From that moment, in both his private and public life, he took a strong stance against the practice, explaining that these beliefs had been the cause of the deaths of many innocent people unjustly accused of practicing it.

Benedict also fought against the use of false medicines and charms for protection from the evil eye. He encouraged sports and other activities. On 2 February, 1990, just days after having refused to pay a tax to pay for a rite intended to expel several 'witches,' he was attacked and beaten to death with stones and clubs. He was only four months away from his 44th birthday

Both paid a heavy price for their unswerving loyalty to the Gospel. There are many more who can be added to this list.

Church Documents

The Church's Prophetic Role.

In the document, "Ecclesia in Africa" strong emphasis is placed on the prophetic role of the Church. In particular, there is reference (Article 70) to documents of the Church ***Populorum Progressio***: "The Church must continue to echo her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless" (281) In the same article it states: "The Church must denounce and combat all that degrades and destroys the person."

And the Encyclical letter of John Paul II ***Sollicitudo Rei Socialis***: *we read: "The condemnation of evils and injustices is also part of that ministry of evangelization in the social field which is an aspect of the Church's prophetic role. But it should be made clear that proclamation is always more important than condemnation and the latter cannot ignore the former, which gives it true solidity and the force of higher motivation. (572)*

Cardinal Peter Turkson, in his Introduction to the Synod: In the document entitled ***"Relatio Ante Disceptationem"*(RAD)** (*Report before the Discussion*) lays out the diverse realities that presently effect Africa.

I would like to reference one aspect of the Cardinal's presentation, as it is a point I wish to develop further.

It concerns the Socio Economic situation :

He says and I quote:

"The Traditional Economic alliances between African states and their colonial masters, for example, "the Commonwealth", have been replaced by other powerful economic alliances between African nations individually or *en bloc* with the USA (Millennium Challenge Account), the European Economic Community (Lomé Culture, Yaoundé Agreement and the Cotonou Agreement) and Japan (TICAD I-III). Lately, China and India, hungry for natural resources, have emerged on the scene, displaying interest in every conceivable aspect of African national economies. At the centre of most of these protocols and agreements is the debate on "trade" and "aid", seeing that countries, which have developed, have done so through trade(not only in "raw material") and not in an "aid-dependency syndrome. It is therefore, of great concern to the young trading economies of Africa, what decisions and "conditionalities" the World Trade organisation (WTO) impose. (page 11 RAD)

What then is the response to be, in practical terms, of Religious Congregations and Missionary Institutes involved in Africa today?

I would firstly like to speak about Religious Institutes male and female who engage with a specific network – AEFJN, to address the imbalances in the economic relationship between Africa and the one third world in what is called the ministry of advocacy.

a) **The ministry of advocacy**

Advocacy is one of the most important strategies in promoting justice in the developing countries of Africa. Decisions made in the wealthy industrialized countries of the northern hemisphere have enormous and long lasting impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of Africans. It is imperative that the voice of Africa be heard at those centres where vital policy decisions affecting the lives of Africans are made.

Inspired by their faith commitment, and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, a number of missionary and Religious Congregations have formed networks to meet this challenge. I wish to draw your attention in particular to the work of the African Faith and Justice Network. This network, established over two decades ago, has two branches, one in the United States, operating from Washington DC (AFJN), and the second in Europe, operating from Brussels (A/EFJN).

The particular concern of these networks is to address issues of structural injustice rooted in European and United States policies that affect Africa adversely, especially in the area of economics. The members of these networks empower one another to lobby their national political decision makers and the international centres of economic power, so as to positively influence decisions taken by the European Union and by the US Congress in favour of Africa.

The ultimate objective of these networks is to promote just and equitable economic relations between Africa and Europe (the AEFJN branch) and between the US and Africa (the AFJN branch). The methods they employ are lobbying, educating and providing information on relevant issues. Questions which the AFJN and AEFJN have worked on in recent years include water rights, seeds and medicines, trade in small and light arms, debt cancellation and European and US Agricultural Policies – all in relationship to Africa.

Regular publications provide the members of these networks with detailed and accurate information on vital matters affecting the lives of Africans and suggest specific issues for lobbying at national and international forums. In many European countries the AEFJN has action groups (antennae) which extend and intensify its advocacy work. In recent years attempts have also been made to establish similar action groups in African countries but with limited success.

I believe that these networks can only serve Africa when there is a significant contribution not only from missionaries and religious working in Africa but

also from the local African churches. There needs to be established a clearer, more radical and stable link between AFJN/AEFJN and Africa. Closer cooperation between the member congregations of these networks and the local Churches of Africa will greatly enhance the effectiveness of their advocacy.

b) *A further prophetic aspect of Religious Life concerns witnessing to the inclusivity of God's Reign*

The Working Document for the Synod noted the remarkable growth of the Church on the Continent of Africa over the past century and especially since the first African Synod, fifteen years ago. A very significant dimension of that growth has been the number of African men and women now directly involved in the *ad gentes* mission of the Church, both as members of recently established local missionary congregations and as members of longer established international institutes. I speak as Superior General of an international missionary institute which today numbers over 200 Africans among its members.

As the “family of God” the Church is challenged to witness and promote the universality of God’s love for all people and the future unity of humanity. Unfortunately, ethnic, tribal and regional divisions still afflict many parts of the African continent, seriously hampering the development of its peoples. The Synod’s Working document acknowledges that these divisions are evident in some African ecclesial communities.

This context makes the witness of international missionary and religious communities both relevant and urgent. These communities represent people (including many Africans) from very different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds who leave their homelands to make a home among strangers. They are committed to learning new languages, eating local food and embedding themselves in the tissue of other ways of being human. Even perhaps more significantly they embrace a wide range of cultural and ethnic differences within their own communities as they live and work together in the service of the Gospel. Thus, by their very existence, these communities give clear and prophetic witness to what Timothy Radcliffe calls “God’s vast home, the wide openness of the Kingdom in which all may belong and be at ease.” Their presence proclaims the Gospel truth that God does not have favourites, that we are all his children and our common destiny is to be one family in Him.

c.) *A third avenue of acting prophetically is through Promoting a positive image of Africa on other continents.*

Africa is poorly served by the mass media, which focuses almost exclusively on the bad news, thus creating a widely accepted account of a continent in a constant state of crisis. The ‘Aid Industry’, too, feeds on selling negative stereotypes of Africans as helpless victims of endless wars and constant

famines. Even some of Africa's strongest advocates - politicians, musicians and businessmen, give the impression of being engaged in a messianic mission to save Africa from its people.

But this presentation of Africa as a land of hopeless, hapless victims is a far cry from the Africa most missionaries and religious have come to know and love. Through years of experience of working for and with its peoples, they are familiar with the Africa of "ordinary miracles" referred to in a recent book by Richard Dowden, *Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*.

This is an Africa seldom mentioned in the media, the Africa of immense beauty, of open spaces and luminous skies, the Africa of ordinary people who humble us by their stoicism, selflessness and exuberant delight in company. This is not the Africa of helpless victims, worthy only of pity. It is rather the Africa of song and dance, of laughter and celebration, of energy, creativity and resilience. It is an Africa that can teach us a lot about what it means to be human and remind us of values that are fast disappearing from the developed countries of the world. The people of Africa must become more central to the narrative of Africa that is propagated abroad and international and missionary institutes are ideally situated to do precisely this.

Africa faces enormous challenges, some of these are problems of its own making as well as problems caused, or at least aggravated, by outside forces. It is also true that Africans cannot solve all these problems alone, but it is equally true, as most commentators now agree, "that the key to Africa's development lies in her children and her ability to be at home in all that is Western and all that is modern, graced by the spirit of ubuntu" (*Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*).

Conclusion

The prophetic call of "Ecclesia in Africa" for all those involved in the life of the Church there to be the "voice of the voiceless" remains urgent and valid. It is the challenge that will test the witness of so many Christians, especially religious, on the continent of Africa, in the coming years.

Religious – male and female, are called upon to give prophetic witness through their life style choices, through their community lives lived in all its diversity under the common faith of being "in Christ" and above all to their commitments to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

Jesus is described in the Gospel of Luke as a "prophet mighty in word and deed" (24:19) as his disciples we, too, must search and discern on how to be prophetic but prophets in the words of St. Paul, who in the context of community, search to "build up, give encouragement and reassurance".