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The Church in Africa and the Search for Abundant Life: Signposts for Renewal and Transformation of God's People in Africa

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Africa: The Bad News

WHENEVER WE TALK OF AFRICA, what strikes immediately is the suffering continent. Africa is full of bad news. According to Thabo Mbeki, Africa is passing through a “dark night.” It is a continent “consumed by death.” So we begin with the bad news.

The continent of Africa is faced with multiple challenges. In spite of Africa's richness in human and material resources, in cultural traditions, and in our embracing of faith commitments, the general image that people have of our beloved continent is that of conflict, war, poverty, suffering, disease, violence, and injustice of every kind. We highlight a few of them below to show the gravity of the problem.

Diseases

Africa is a host of many diseases that have claimed millions of her people: malaria, Ebola, sleeping sickness, HIV/AIDS, *et al.* Up to 25 percent of the African population is infected with HIV/AIDS. Although our approximately 750 million people constitute only 12.5 percent of the world

population, we contribute up to 75 percent of the world cases of HIV/AIDS.¹

Political Instability

In the last four decades, thirty-five out of fifty-three states in Africa (about 66 percent) have been wracked by conflict, much of it internal. At least twenty-three African heads of state or government (which is nearly half of the heads of state) have military backgrounds, among them men who have led armed rebellions against the state. Africa has a shameful history of violence, exacerbated by slavery and colonialism, which continues to this day. Her children are at the mercy of destructive forces unleashed by criminals and gangsters, tyrants and dictators—violence, fraudulent elections, bribery, corruption, and above all, an obscene passion for wealth that is a cause of all these ills.

Poor Leadership

Africa has a chronic cancer of corruption, economic mismanagement, and bigotry. African leaders loot their countries' wealth with impunity, bleeding their own kin to death, impoverishing their countries and perpetuating corruption. Independent Africa has witnessed more incidence of human rights corruption, injustice, and oppression than it did in colonial times. Many political leaders own public lands and assets wrongly, or take social positions to enrich themselves.

Poverty

Africa has about 60 percent of the world's natural resources, while most of our people live on less than \$1 a day! Forget about the rosy figures presented to us of so-called strong economic growth and macro-economic success; Africa remains the poorest continent in the world. The rosy figures represent only some areas. Distribution of welfare gains has varied across regions, sectors, and social/economic groups. The poverty gap and the depth of poverty have increased especially in rural areas. This poverty

1. See UNDP, Human Development Reports 1990–97.

is multi-faceted: low levels of income, physical insecurity, poor health, low education, and disempowerment.²

This state of affairs has led to a dependency syndrome that has eroded our self-confidence, initiative, and creativity. Some just flee for low-paying jobs or a life of dependency in the developed world, sometimes in very degrading circumstances.

Climate Change

Climate change may be the greatest challenge facing humanity in this century, a challenge in which the world's poorest countries and the world's poorest people—the bulk of which are in Africa—will bear the brunt.³

These and many other factors conjure up frightening images of savagery in contemporary Africa. Africa has to rebel against them, to banish the shame, and the only way out is to look back on Africa's past achievements and find hope for the future. There is no need to indulge in self-contempt. Admittedly, the picture may be bleak—but it is not the whole picture. This limited optimism is what is challenging African theologians, such as the writers of this book, to discern numerous signs of incipient African revival in the present situation. I for one am happy to be pointing to the signposts of hope and renewal.

Africa: the Good News

Not all is bad news in Africa. Archbishop Buti believes that Africa's internal criticism has been exaggerated by Western observers and their ardent followers, giving rise to pessimism that is unjustified.⁴ This mind set has become known as "Afro-pessimism," a feeling of despair among foreigners and even among Africans themselves, but we refuse to label Africa as "the hopeless continent." There is an unarticulated part of Africa that is not cited: its glorious past. This includes the emergence of *homo sapiens*; the numerous cave paintings; the art and architecture of ancient Africa;

2. UNDP, Human Development Report 2000.

3. The Human Development Report 2007/2008 shows that climate change is not just a future scenario. Increased exposure to droughts, floods, and storms is already destroying opportunity and reinforcing inequality. Meanwhile, some believe that the world is moving toward the point at which irreversible ecological catastrophe becomes unavoidable.

4. Thlagale, "Religion and Renaissance," 16–22.

the centers of learning at Alexandria; Ethiopian Christianity, and more. Africa hosted Joseph and his brethren in time of famine and also gave refuge to the Holy Family. Africa was the seed ground of Christian saints and theologians like Augustine, Tertullian, Cyprian, and other Fathers. These must be recalled to give us hope.

More recently, several events have happened in Africa that bring hope to even the worst of pessimists: to name two, the acquisition of independence in all African countries and self-governance. These countries, despite what Mveng calls “structural poverty,”⁵ have continued to persevere and exist until today. There are emerging social structures that are improving life for Africans, even if they do not match those of the developed world.

A 2006 World Bank report⁶ states that 2005 may have been the year when Africa “turned the corner” from poverty and debt to prosperity and wealth. In a continent that was once dependent on foreign aid, there are now sixteen countries that have achieved annual growth rates in excess of 4.5 percent for more than a decade. Several African countries—Senegal, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Uganda, and Ghana—are on course to cut the number of people living in poverty by 2010.

Enrolment in primary schools has increased continent-wide, from 72 percent in 1990 to 93 percent in 2004, and literacy rates have risen to 65 percent in 2002, from a previous rate 50 percent in 1997.

In the ecclesiastical arena are springs of hope as well. At a meeting with diocesan clergy of AOSTA on July 25, 2005,⁷ Pope Benedict XVI noted that vocations are increasing in the Southern part of Africa; indeed they are so numerous that it is proving impossible to build enough seminaries to accommodate all the young men who want to be priests. He attributes to this *inter alia* a certain enthusiasm of faith because they are in a specific period of history. In a sense, it is springtime of faith in Africa.

The Church as Family of God in Africa

The theme of the Plenary assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), the special Assembly for

5. Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation,” 157–58.

6. <http://www.britainusa.com/>.

7. Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Diocesan Clergy of Aosta at Introd Parish Church, Aosta Valley, 25 July 2005.

Africa of the Synod of Bishops held in 1994, was *The Church as the Family of God*. This image emphasizes the special character of the Church as a communion, easily the most outstanding trait of life in Africa. It was the bishops' hope that an exploration of the African family as an image of the Church will contribute in no small measure to a better understanding of the nature, mission, and destiny of the Church in Africa.

There are still people in this twenty-first century, both non-Africans and, unfortunately, some alienated Africans themselves, who find it very hard to believe that African cultures can add to the understanding of Christianity and Church. Any African model is suspect, while Eurocentric theological, biblical, liturgical, moral, and ecclesiastical models are sacrosanct—in effect, making the European model synonymous with “Christianity.” This needs to be seriously addressed in the wake of the Africa being the hope and beacon of the Church today. Now is the time for counter-evangelization. In this way, Africa can define itself and position itself in the life of the Church. It is therefore right and fitting that the rich model of African family was used in the Synod.

The African experience of family is much wider than the word suggests in Europe and America. This idea is supported by Mbiti, who says a family in Africa includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters who may have their own children, and other immediate relatives.⁸ He adds that the family also includes departed relatives and unborn members still in the loins of the living. As the bishops of South Africa expressed in their inter-regional meeting during the preparations for the Synod, African traditional culture is centered on family.⁹ Speaking to the Catholic laity in Harare, Zimbabwe, Pope John Paul II rightly said, “African traditional culture is centered on the family. Africa cannot flourish unless its families survive present social upheavals. The African family must find new strength, reaffirm the positive values contained in tradition, and assimilate a more personal dimension of understanding, commitment and love.”¹⁰

We certainly recognize that African cultures, like all cultures, are dynamic. Unfortunately, we cannot fail to note that the African family is in mortal danger. The migrant labor system, social and geographical

8. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.

9. Browne *et al.*, *African Synod*, 45.

10. Pope John Paul II in his visit to Harare, Zimbabwe, 11 September 1998.

mobility, unemployment, housing shortages, rural-urban migrations, internal displacement due to civil wars (placing people in squalid “displaced person” camps), refugees, the corrosive influence of the Western neo-pagan culture, and the many factors are destroying the traditional family and its many positive values. It is only, as the Pope said, by assimilating a more personal dimension of understanding, commitment, and love that African family culture can be saved.

This theme of the Church as family in Africa runs through the African Synod and is repeated several times to underscore its importance. The African family is a model of the living Church: it includes everyone. It is the basis of unity and solidarity because it means sharing roles and involving all. It emphasizes small communities, fitting the ecclesiologies developed by several African theologians based on the family, clan, and tribe. As the bishops pointed out, they owe much to African theological reflections on this point to bring new life into the Church; this will be one of the greatest contributions of African Church to the universal Church.

This sense of community is not only expressed in the family but permeates the whole of African society. The African is a citizen of the whole world, open to life and receptive to new ideas. African culture is not a discriminating culture. There is a sense of community and hospitality—a trait that any visitor will not fail to discover. In the words of Stan Ilo, they do not understand the language of exclusion or racial bar. Any animosity between tribes only occurs in the political and economic balancing game.¹¹ The African loves “newness” and very easily interacts with anyone of any culture or color. In Africa, people know each other and share their joys and sorrows with each other. The sense of community is alive and vibrant, even in the midst of urbanization and westernization.

The Hope of Africa: Signposts of Renewal and Transformation

In spite of Africa’s present dire predicament, there are already signs of an incipient renaissance. As far back as April 1998, Thabo Mbeki (even before he succeeded Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa) used the phrase “African renaissance” in a lecture he delivered to the United Nations University in Tokyo.¹² In August the same year, he broadcast his

11. Ilo, *Face of Africa*, 296.

12. Mbeki, “Mbeki speaks.”

“African Renaissance Statement.” And, on the eve of the millennium, he made his “Our African Century” speech to the South African National Assembly.¹³ In October 1998, an “African Renaissance” Conference was convened in Johannesburg, followed by the foundation of an “African Renaissance Institute” and the creation of a ministerial committee on African Renaissance in the South African Government.¹⁴ In November 1999, another Conference on African Renaissance was convened at the Africa Centre in London.¹⁵ Numerous writers of all shades and opinions since then have published reflections that provide a roadmap toward African renewal and transformation: we are people of hope.

This concept of African Renaissance used by Mbeki is not new in the history of cultures and religions, either. In 1864, St. Daniel Comboni had already talked of his “Plan for the Regeneration of Africa,” with “regeneration” synonymous with “renaissance.”¹⁶ Rebirth implies a previous existence, but it also celebrates a new reality, a creative transformation of the old. We are talking here of a deeper and more vital concept than just “cultural revival” or “cultural retrieval,” which merely suggests the identical recovery of a past experience, as some Africans would like to have.

Other heroes and heroines have also helped shape the new Africa making its appearance at this moment of history. We can look to both the past and the present for these signs of hope. Individuals like Leopold Senghor, Archbishop Kiwanuka Joseph (First African bishop south of the Sahara in modern times), Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu (African nationalists); John Mbiti, Sr. Theresa Okure, and John Mary Walligo (African theologians); Martha Karua (Nobel prize winner), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (the first African woman president), and Justice Julia Ssebuteinde (Presiding Judge in Special Court for Sierra Leone at the International Criminal Court) have greatly contributed to African renaissance. Artists like Lucky Dube, Miriam Makeba, and Chaka Chaka have brought new hope to the African continent. Prolific writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Okot p’Bitek, Ken Sarowiwa, and Ali Mazrui have set a precedent in African literature that is making Africa more aware of itself in the global context.

13. SABC, “African Renaissance Statement.”

14. Haffajee, “Midwives.”

15. Davies, “African Renaissance?” 18

16. Shorter, *African Imagination*, 40–42.

If we take the example of South Africa, skeptics who have always presented Africans as brutal and murderous were brought to shame when apartheid ended. To their utter amazement, the oppressive, dehumanizing reign of apartheid was followed not by orgies of retribution and revenge by Africans on Whites but by the extraordinary Truth and Reconciliation commission, a process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Nelson Mandela is one of the world's most revered statesmen today because he demonstrated magnanimity and generosity of spirit in his willingness to forgive his tormentors and the oppressors of his people. He is today an icon, a saint of forgiveness and reconciliation, in a world that has become ruthless and belligerent—as demonstrated by terrorism throughout the world and the famous war on terror led by the mighty United States.

Other encouraging signs and movements across Africa have emerged within the last few years. There is a growing intolerance of dictators and human-rights abusers. Former leaders, even presidents, can face the wrath of the law for crimes against their people.¹⁷ There are signs of emerging hope of democracies in many African countries. The winds of change are blowing in Africa, and people are demanding, ever more insistently, the recognition and promotion of human rights and freedoms. National oppressive leaders can no longer hide in the name of “non-interference in internal affairs of a country.” Action against dictators and those usurping legitimate governments through undemocratic means can no longer do so without raising international eyebrows. Cases in point: Darfur, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and most recently, Kenya—where warring parties were pressured to have a government of national unity. ECOWAS, ECOMOG, the African Union, etc., are all examples of a concern by Africans for Africans themselves. Gradually, we see the development of democratic institutions and structures in the African continent. Even if they're far from perfect, at least they're moving in the right direction. The right questions are being asked.

It is interesting, though not surprising, that such examples of humanity should be regarded as an inspiration for the moral renewal which underlies the concept of the African renaissance. Although sometimes presented as an agent of division and war in Africa, religion does occupy

17. The case in point is the trial of Charles Taylor, the former president of Sierra Leone, and many others who have been indicted by the International Criminal Court. Some warlords, like the Lord's Resistance Rebel leaders of Joseph Kony of Uganda and others in the DRC, are wanted to answer charges in the International Criminal Court.

a very central role in this African renaissance, and the abuse of religion does not invalidate its potentially positive contribution. According to Buti Tlhagale, African renaissance seeks to bring out what is noble in humanity. It is a new orientation—a radical shift in the scales of preference, this adoption of spiritual values that have been overlooked. To him it is, therefore, a form of religious development.¹⁸

Stan Ilo, in his book *The Face of Africa*, prefers to call this an Afro-Christian vision. I totally agree with him when he says that hope is a principle that sustains belief in the rich possibilities of the future for Africa. Ilo builds up an Afro-Christian vision of hope as a theological category; it is that there can be no transformation of any society, and no emergence of a culture of hope, without the integration of a religious component into the whole reality. When we look at the religious revival at work in Africa even within traditional, conservative, established churches, we are filled with more hope. For many established historical churches experiencing decline in the West, the hope for their continuity and revival is in Africa.

Recommendations

The African renewal and revival is, first of all, a discovery by Africans themselves—a confidence-building voyage of discovery into their past without remorse or shame. It is a rediscovery of Africa's soul and a restoration of her self-esteem. It is a mass crusade for Africa's renewal. It is a determination to learn and a desire for genuine liberation. In the words of Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan Nobel Peace Laureate, 2004, it is important that a critical mass of Africans do not accept the verdict that the world tries to push down their throat so as to give to and succumb. The struggle must continue to nurture new ideas and initiatives that can make a difference.

The political and economic objectives of the African renewal and revival include eradicating hunger and poverty, promoting economic growth and integration, developing infrastructures, eliminating HIV/AIDS, creating a non-racial and non-sexist society, and restoring human dignity. The social and moral objectives include the abolition of militarism in governance and one-party states, the democratic empowerment of the people, the elimination of corruption and the abuse of power, the

18. Tlhagale, "Religion and Renaissance," 16–22.

resort to peaceful means of conflict resolution, and solving the problem of brain-drain. The religious objective is to redefine and position Africa as a beacon of hope for Christianity.

In the words of Mbeki, such a program is a call to rebellion against tyrants and parasites, but a call as well to generate new knowledge and apply this knowledge for beneficial social change. For this to happen, Africa must become a learning society, with a friendly intellectual environment. Africa must be brave enough to gear its academic courses to suit our African experience and needs. Africa has a right to see the world from its own perspective and model—to not only integrate its own practical wisdom and skills within the new technology, but to resist intellectual and economic colonialism.

Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, can contribute to the regeneration of humanity through the discipline of sacrifice and self-denial. From a purely pragmatic point of view, religions cross the boundaries of African states and can help to provide the intercultural and inter-ethnic dimension of this new society of Africa. All communities of faith share in what Tilhagale calls a “mystery of fellowship,” which they try to live. The Church is, in fact, a model—even a laboratory—of this new society proclaimed by the African renaissance.

The content of salvation positively entails the remission of sins, the removal of evil, freedom and new life for the children of God, and the hope for eternal life. That means that liberation from structures of sin and injustice is part and parcel of African renewal and salvation. Salvation also embraces the final redemption of our bodies (Phil 3:20). This is fully possible only through the transforming power and presence of Christ in African culture and life. This calls for us to be critical as well of any African cultures that may mitigate fullness and abundance of life.

Conclusion

It is true that Africa is challenged on many fronts: economically, politically, emotionally, socially, culturally, religiously, etc. This is cause for worry. Contemporary Africa can be compared to a man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; he fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him and departed leaving him for dead (Luke 10:30–36). Africa is a continent where countless human beings—men, women, children, and young

people—are lying, as it were on the edge of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalized, and abandoned.

But it's not all bad news. Africa is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities that it offers to the churches and to humanity as a whole. These human values can contribute to an effective reversal of the continent's dramatic situation and facilitate that worldwide revival on which the desired development of individual nations depends.

Africans have a profound religious sense—a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and the spiritual world. The reality of sin in its individual and social forms is very much present in the consciousness of these peoples, as is also the need for rites of purification and expiation. These are ingredients and a recipe for reconciliation, forgiveness, and respect for human life that gives us much hope for the continent.

In African culture and tradition, the role of the family is fundamental. Open to this sense of family, of love and respect for life, the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God. The Pope rightly said:

The sons and daughters of Africa love life. It is precisely this love for life that leads them to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors. They believe intuitively that the dead will continue to live and remain in communion with them. Is this not in some way a preparation for the belief in the communion of saints? The peoples of Africa respect life which is conceived and born. They rejoice in this life. They reject the idea that it can be destroyed, even when the so-called “progressive civilizations” would like to lead them in this direction. And practices hostile to life are imposed upon them by means of economic systems which serve the selfish rich.¹⁹

Africans show their respect for human life until its natural end, and keep their elderly parents and relatives within the family.

African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life. In Africa, it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village. Indeed, community life in African societies expresses the extended family. If Africa preserves this priceless cultural heritage and never succumbs to the temptation of individualism, which is alien to its best traditions, then there is cause to rejoice: we are on the right track.

19. John Paul II, “Homily,” 3.