



AFRICA IN THE



Will this month's Synod for Africa be able to be fully owned by Africans because it addresses the Church's internal and external needs?

BY ELSE STRIVENS

The second African Synod, to be held in Rome October 4-25, 2009, will place on the world stage the potential and difficulties of the African Catholic Church. On television, the opening Mass of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will showcase a colorful, dynamic and exuberant Church. The reality of the lives of the one sixth of the world's courageous and resourceful people who live in Africa is actually a more complex and compelling human drama.

Africa is a continent of great diversity, with myriad ethnic, tribal and cultural differences. Besides dialects, some 2,000 different languages are spoken. Consider this obstacle for the teams of Catholics and Protestants in Africa now cooperating to translate the Bible into mother tongues!

Africa has 3.25 times as much land as the United States. The continent has large deserts and arid areas and, with the advent of climate change, increasing water-poor regions. In the majority of countries, the infrastructure is underdeveloped and fragmented.

The African continent and its islands consist of 62 nation-states, with differing economies and systems of governance ranging from dictatorships to democracies.

In 1900, Africa had 178 million people, with five percent of those Christians of all denominations. Since the mid-1960s, the population has tripled to one billion. Christians comprise 46 percent and Muslims 40 percent of the

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SPOTLIGHT

African people; the rest belong mostly to traditional and animist religions.

About one third of the Christians are Catholic (about 17 percent of the entire African population), a third are mainline Protestant and the remaining third belong to “renewalist” Churches—Pentecostal and charismatic, including African Instituted Churches, independent offshoots from Protestant denominations that have inculturated African traditions.

Differences in mineral riches and oil and in the availability of water and arable land, and distinct burdens of bacterial and viral diseases and parasites, add to the complexity.

Daily, incredible courage, dignity, optimism and the indomitable human spirit struggle alongside ignorance, poverty and underdevelopment. In sub-Saharan Africa, less than 75 percent of children are enrolled in primary schools and an average of 28 percent in high schools, according to UNESCO.

Violence, corruption and greed for resources (from inside and outside our continent) and gender inequality bedevil us in our struggle for a more egalitarian portion of the global economy. The arms trade, trade tariffs, Western subsidies of agricultural products and the dumping of excess food play a major role.

The target of the Millennium Development Goals and poverty reduction is ever before us. And courageous voices also challenge us as Africans to examine our cultures to see how they contribute to our situation.

Feudalism, Hospitality Only for Kin

In May 2008, Nigerian Father Paulinus Odozor, C.S.Sp., wrote in *The Tablet* of London about “Africa’s double-edged sword”: how the continent’s ancient cultures, as well as its colonial legacy, have thwarted the growth of human rights and modern leadership.

In traditional societies, hospitality was extended to people from one’s family clan or ethnic group and is often praised as a virtue of Africa. But since *ubuntu* is often limited to kinship, it needs to be extended to promote a culture of universal human rights.

The feudal understanding of leadership for life, as a God-given right, has meant that many African leaders believed that they were the sole custodians of their communities’ resources and that they were not answerable to anyone. Traditional beliefs and practices continue to have power, and syncretism in Christianity and Islam exist. When people are seriously ill, it is not uncommon, regardless of churchgoing practice, to consult a *sangoma* (traditional healer) for a potion or charm. Witchcraft and female genital mutilation, sadly, are still prevalent.

Interestingly, South Africa’s first indigenous candidate being proposed for sainthood, Benedict Daswa (1946-1990), a primary school teacher from the Limpopo province, was stoned and bludgeoned to death because of his stand against witchcraft.

The distribution of Catholics in each country differs greatly (see “Growing Church” on page 43). The north of Africa, which was first evangelized at the time of the Apostle Mark, had its flowering in the period before the conquest by Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries. It is now predominantly Muslim. In the northeast, Ethiopia was evangelized by the Apostle Philip.

In the sub-Sahara, Portuguese missionaries arrived in the Congo in the 15th century in the wake of the explorers; the tremendous growth in the Christian community there, however, took place more recently under Belgian rule. In most sub-Saharan countries, evangelization began only in the mid-19th century. Throughout Africa, local catechists have played a critical



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(Opposite) Signs of a dynamic Christianity in Africa abound. The Church’s challenge is to teach the equal dignity of every man, woman and child.

(Top) Lydia Kathebwe, who is HIV-positive, lies on the ground next to her child. Women make up 60 percent of Africa’s HIV/AIDS cases.

(Middle) Child labor in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere in Africa is a major problem.

(Bottom) Wars and economic hardships have produced millions of refugees in Africa. This boatful was found off the Senegal coast.



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role in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

A Young Population

What defines the African Church and the continental challenge now is that 40 percent of Africa's population is under 15 years of age and a further 20 percent is between the ages of 15 and 24.

The marked decrease in life expectancy in 24 sub-Saharan countries, now ranging between 38 and 50 years (see sidebar on p. 45), is due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. There will be about 18 million AIDS orphans by 2010 (AMREF). There are now very many child-headed families as well as families headed by a single parent or single grandparent. This challenges the Church's model of family.

The Church presently has a great challenge in providing catechesis. Most baptized Catholics attend church but often do not receive the other sacraments, at times due to the traditional structure of marriage. Marriage is frequently delayed until a *lobola* (bride-price) has been paid.

The First African Synod

The 1994 African Synod was held on the theme: "The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000: *You Shall Be My Witnesses* (Acts 1:8)." When Pope John Paul II announced it in 1989, it generated so much interest that it garnered the highest-ever synod responses recorded during a preparatory phase. The *lineamenta* (guidelines and preparatory questions) remain an interesting document for reflection. The later *instrumentum laboris* (working document) of 1993 has five sub-themes: proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace, and means of social communication.

Ecumenism in Africa was seen by John Paul II as a priority. The section in the guidelines on dialogue, especially with African traditional religions, recognized that cultural heritage determines the interpretation of reality and worldview. Aspects of rituals and the situation of women in African cultures, as well as positive and negative moral, cultural and social values, were examined.

Dialogue with Islam was considered in some detail: positive advances, the problems around *sharia* law, the increase in itinerant preaching and the proliferation of Islamic centers and mosques, even where there are few adherents. Mentioned was the growing religious intolerance where Islam is the majority religion.

Perhaps the social communication theme was the least developed; it implied a major pastoral challenge for the Church, with implications for the formation of priests and others. In Africa, it would mean an increased need for competent social communication skills and resources, with facility in the languages of the different communities and familiarity with their cultures' symbols, proverbs and myths.

A major focus of the first synod was peace and justice, understandably, as the Rwanda massacres and the electoral triumph of Nelson Mandela in South Africa took place at the time of the 1994 meeting. Africans themselves were disappointed that the synod was not held on African soil.

Many thought the follow-up disappointing as well. After John Paul II's visit to Africa in 1995, he issued an apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, theologically naming the Church in Africa "the Family of God," seeing it fully alive, through relationship with God and each other. But this letter did not filter down to the grassroots Church.

One commentator in Tanzania says that the first synod was not fully owned by Africans because most of the themes were not felt to be needs and that an organic movement needs to "rise up" from society to counteract social cancers.

Declarations, documents, dogmas and doctrines have their place, but actions and deeds—not words—will make the future Church in Africa (and elsewhere) relevant and credible, according to the Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx. So the first synod raised the question, "Church of Africa, what must we do to be relevant and credible?"

In my opinion, one of the guidelines of that first synod—"The Church in



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(Top) Students raise their hands during English lessons at the minor seminary of St. Thérèse of Mvolye in Yaounde, Cameroon.

(Middle) In Chad nine percent of the people are Catholic. Here, a Catholic priest baptizes an adult in a river, as many fundamentalist preachers do.

(Bottom) Pope Benedict XVI is greeted by a Cameroonian nun upon his arrival at the Yaounde airport on March 17, 2009.

Africa is called to evangelize herself first”—still holds a critical challenge for us.

Good work is being done to develop African theologians, men and women. And we hope this new synod will encourage the enlivening theology that is desperately needed to push boundaries and parameters.

2009 Synod Theme Well-Chosen

In a context of continuing violence and greed, and the competition for scarce resources, the theme of the second African synod is fitting indeed: “The Church in Africa, at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: *You Are the Salt of the Earth...You Are the Light of the World* (Matthew 5:13-14).” (See sidebar on page 44.)

The Special Council for Africa and Synod of Bishops’ secretariat released the working document in January, and the pope brought it with him when he visited Cameroon in March. The Vatican believes this document presents important aspects of the ecclesial and social situation in Africa, as well as the challenges. It hopes that the new synod will promote the conclusions of the first one and “give effective answers to an African continent thirsty for reconciliation and in search of justice and peace,” according to a February 15, 2009, Zenit News Service article.

The working document has a theological preface, followed by a chapter on the implementation of *Ecclesia in Africa* and its relevance to the current cultural, economic and political context. It then switches to a thematic theological reflection.

Chapter Two underlines the need for justice and peace, and for restoring harmony between victims and offenders. Chapter Three focuses on evangelization and human promotion at the service of humankind—open in dialogue with others. Chapter Four reflects on the witness of all Church members (bishops, priests, religious and lay), emphasizing tasks incumbent on them. The document concludes with a look at the resources of Christian spirituality and a prayer to Our Lady of Africa.

Few African Catholics to whom I have spoken have read the document.

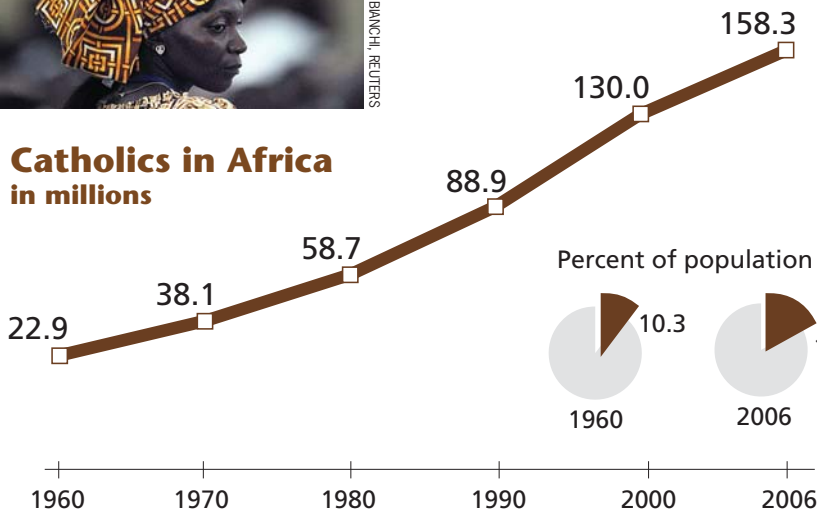


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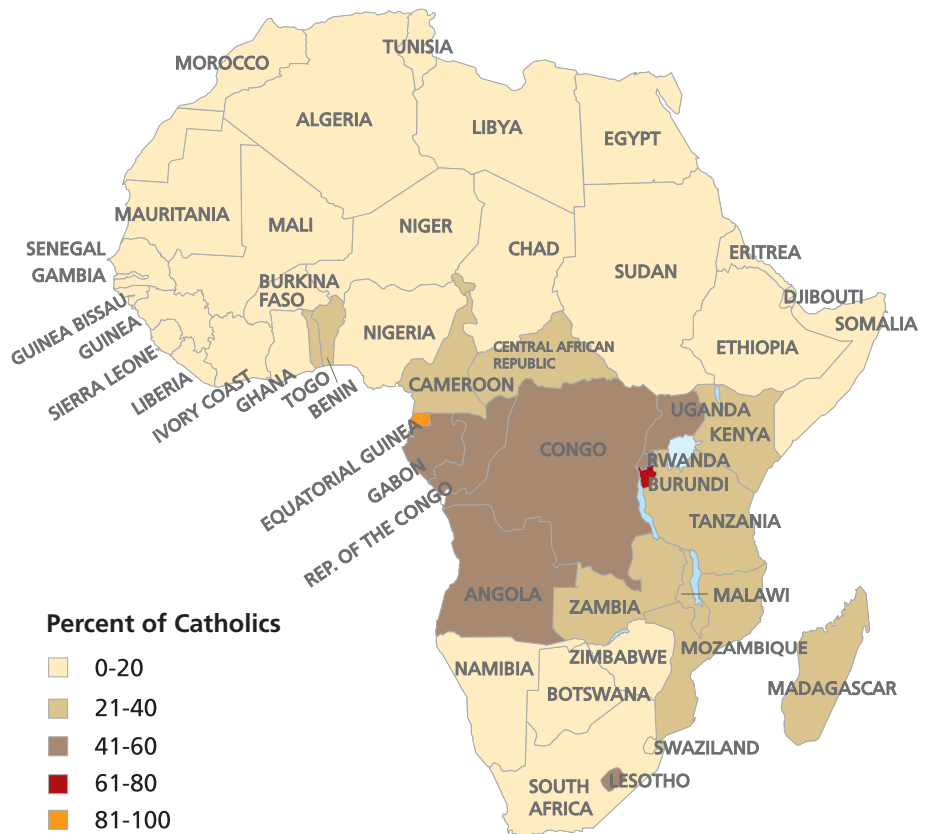
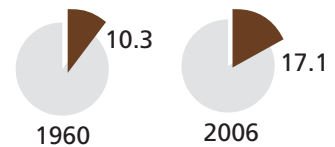
Growing Church

The Church in Africa has grown steadily in recent decades and continues to thrive on the continent with 14 percent of the world’s population.

Catholics in Africa in millions



Percent of population



(Figures are as of January 2007)

SOURCES: OUR SUNDAY VISITOR'S CATHOLIC ALMANAC, NATIONAL CATHOLIC ALMANAC

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One missionary priest, who has read it but prefers not to be identified, expressed to me the hope that “by some miracle” the second synod will be more successful than the first. But he fears that the preparation has not been promising.

While it is meaningful for bishops to network and to understand better the regional dynamics, some Catholics think that the central issue for the African Church is being skirted, namely, the hierarchical, patriarchal system from which the Church operates, which reinforces African patriarchal cultures.

Many worry that this second synod will be speaking about what sits “out there” rather than dealing with the internal structures of the Church and how they serve as a model for society. It’s a safe, patriarchal model, with power and control, but neither accountable to the people nor transparent.

The instruction that the issues of priestly celibacy and the abuse of women by clerics in Africa are not to be mentioned at the synod is illuminating.

Gender Issues, Good Governance

Underlying gender issues drive the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, where 60 percent of those infected are women. The vast canvas of personal tragedies playing out in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 24.7 million are living with HIV/AIDS, needs courageous witness by all Catholics and an irreproachable model of living by Church leaders. Sub-Saharan Africa still has 2.7 million new infections and 1.9 million deaths annually, according to 2007 U.N. statistics.

Gender issues underpin many of the crises in Africa: HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, unemployment, underdevelopment and poverty. The trafficking, abuse and rape of displaced and refugee women continue to be a scandal.

It was refreshing to hear President Barack Obama speak out about the need for good governance during his recent visit to Ghana. We were encouraged by the response to this by Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga. He acknowledged that perhaps Africa has had mediocrity in governance. He mentioned that, at the time of independence,

What’s Different About a Special Assembly of Bishops?

THE OCTOBER 4-25 meeting at the Vatican is a *special assembly* of the World Synod of Bishops. Although its total membership will roughly equal last year’s *general assembly* of the World Synod of Bishops, the 36 African episcopal conferences and two Eastern Churches will be more heavily represented than the ones outside Africa. Likewise, more auditors and experts than usual will be from Africa.

The synod addresses the theme “The Church in Africa, at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: *You Are the Salt of the Earth... You Are the Light of the World* (Matthew 5:13-14).”

Pope Benedict XVI has appointed as president-delegates Cardinals Francis Arinze (retired prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, from Nigeria), Theodore-Adrien Sarr (Dakar, Senegal) and Wilfrid Napier, O.F.M. (Durban, South Africa).

Cardinal Peter Turkson (Cape Coast, Ghana) is the synod’s recording secretary, assisted by Archbishop Damiano Franklin (Luanda, Angola) and Bishop Edmond Djitangar (Sarh, Chad).

A 12-member Special Council for Africa began work after the synod’s 1994 special assembly for Africa. After preparing *The Church in Africa* (the 1995 post-synodal exhortation), they met regularly and drew up the current synod’s *lineamenta* (outline and questionnaire) and *instrumentum laboris* (working document). It quotes Saints Cyprian (d. 258) and Augustine (d. 430), prominent bishops and theologians from North Africa, on the Church’s unity.

These documents and regular bulletins about the Synod can be found in the Synod of Bishops’ section at www.vatican.va.

Kenya, Ghana and South Korea had similarly sized economies. But now, more than 45 years later, the economy of South Korea is 40 times that of the two African countries.

An issue that dogs the Church in many places is the division of bishops and clergy along tribal lines; this surfaced in the recent tensions in Zimbabwe and Kenya. We hope for courageous and prophetic leaders in the African Catholic Church. But as one cleric confided, it is dangerous to be prophetic; you may be relegated to the furthest parish of the diocese. The appointment of courageous, discerning bishops is critical.

Some Progress Since 1994

Since the first African synod, there has, of course, been progress. Many bishops’

conferences now have active justice and peace commissions, and there is more sharing of successes and failures among the countries. The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) has launched a continental good-governance project from Ghana. Bishops’ conferences in more countries are setting up parliamentary liaison offices to monitor law-making and governance. Peace studies are being offered at universities and peace institutes across Africa, for example, at the Hekima Peace Institute in Kenya and at St. Augustine College in Johannesburg, South Africa (where the Denis Hurley Peace Institute has recently been launched in Durban).

There have also been many initiatives around conflict resolution and peace-building: countless workshops by

SECAM, lectures like the 2004 one at St. Augustine College in Johannesburg by Father Leonel Gomez (founder of the schools of forgiveness and reconciliation in Colombia, South America), the tireless work of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and local and regional Catholic media organizations, justice and peace commissions, religious communities, Sant'Egidio and many others. These are starting to bear fruit.

Soldiers are being debriefed and rehabilitated. In areas close to conflict zones, workshops for media workers and Church leadership have been run by John Katunga of CRS and others to examine the interrelationship among justice, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and truth. Which of these comes first? Which comes first: words or actions?

A recent "first" was the gender festival in Kenya that highlighted the important role of male activism in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Men and women, also from adjoining countries, discussed deeply ingrained attitudes: "...from early childhood, boys are socialized into gender roles fashioned to keep them in power and control, and grow up believing that dominant behavior towards girls and women is acceptable." "...Societal attitudes...of discrimination against women cannot be changed by one group alone...It involves a change in all people and

2008 Life Expectancy in Africa

LIFE EXPECTANCY in the United States is 77.5 years. According to the 2008 *CIA World Fact Book*, many people in a number of African countries die much younger, due to the high prevalence of AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. Only 30 percent of those who need treatment for HIV/AIDS can access it. Life expectancy is less than:

- **Age 40** in Swaziland, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Lesotho;
- **Age 45** in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa and Central African Republic;
- **Age 50** in Chad, Guinea Bissau, Nigeria, Somalia, Rwanda, Ivory Coast, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia.



CNS PHOTO/FINBAR O'REILLY, REUTERS

societies." "We can reverse this by promoting new values that encourage communication, cooperation and equality between boys and girls before they become men and women," according to a July 14 report from Catholic Information Services Africa.

Connecting on the Parish Level

These initiatives need to be brought to the parish level, too. An informed laity needs to claim its right to have a voice to examine how Church is being lived. Local community radios are the main media outlets in Africa, with a few Internet newsletters, national and diocesan newspapers and magazines. But the media landscape will change dramati-

cally with the digital roll-out, cellular phones and increasing Internet usage. How are we, as Church, preparing for those opportunities?

In the June/July 2008 issue of *Worldwide*, Father Peter Henriot, S.J., of Zambia, proposes that the following five issues should take center stage at the synod: 1) accountability and transparency in Church affairs, with that Church, beyond the bishops, having a say; 2) a holistic approach to the HIV/AIDS crisis, which is a development and social-justice issue; 3) inclusion of women in decision-making: by championing education of girls, by campaigning against the abuse of women and by teaching the equal dignity of women in sermons, catechesis and small Christian community discussions; 4) sustainable and integral development (poverty is still a scandalous affront to the image of God in our midst); and 5) peace and conflict resolution ("The Call for a More Relevant Church").

In Africa, we love and honor our Church and our bishops. We pray for the success of the synod and we, in the gallery, await with hope the outcome of their deliberations. A

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PHOTO BY JUDAS MHOZYA

In Tanzania in October 2008, African Catholic journalists discussed the Catholic media's role in peacebuilding: (left to right) Father Jean-Claude Atsain (Ivory Coast), Marie-Louise Diandy (Senegal), Else Strivens (South Africa), Cecile Kalambayi (DNR) and Sister Denis (Uganda).