

THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY
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1. I thank God for the opportunity to be part of this conference. Coming from outside the Great Lakes Region, I have been able to be more informed about the realities of this region, even though I cannot say that I now understand everything! As I think of where I come from, I cannot but thank God that we have so far been spared some of the tragedies that have engulfed this region. I thank God because I know that our leaders have not been much better than those who have plunged this region into near chaos.
2. It is a most distressing fact that, as we look back over the past forty years of political independence in our dear continent of Africa, it has largely been a history of a tragic socio-political failure. Bad government, military dictatorships, pseudo-democratic oppressive regimes, “sit-tight” rulers who hold their people hostage, manipulation of ethnic and religious differences, all resulting in misery for the people at large: this has been mainly the order of the day. Add unto this the negative selfish interference and looting by foreign powers, and the gloomy picture is complete.
3. These past years have largely co-incided with the period of the maturing of the African Church, of the transition from foreign missionary led to indigenous leadership. On the whole, the young African Church was not prepared to meet the heavy challenges and responsibilities, which the chaotic socio-political situation placed on her inexperienced shoulder. Nevertheless, it can be said that, on the whole, that Church did not do too badly. It certainly managed her affairs better than the states. In fact, often where everything collapsed, only the Church and her structures survived to give the people the minimum of support. Those who glibly talk about “the failure of Catholic evangelization in Africa” may find themselves guilty of denying the work of God on our continent.
4. The “African Synod” which met in Rome in 1994, was a providential opportunity to reflect on these issues, to assess the record of performance of the Church, to identify areas of success and failure,

and to plot out new ways for the Church so that her message could be “more credible and relevant” in the emerging African environment. One important lesson from the Synod can be formulated as follows. We have done quite well on the pastoral level, with a record growth in statistics of church institutions. We have also done impressive work in social welfare and development programs, especially education and health. But we have not been adequately effective in bringing Gospel values to bear on the political arena, where decisions that affect the lives of the people are taken. We had presumed that with good catechesis, and solemn worship services, our people would be good Christians, ready to witness to and stand for gospel values in the public forum. We now know that such assumption is misplaced. The African Synod already pointed out some lines of action, especially in the chapter on “Justice and Peace”. The Second African Synod which was convoked by Pope John Paul II and confirmed by Benedict XVI, will concentrate on this matter, with the theme: *The Church in Africa in the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: “You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world”* (Mt 5:13-14). The *Lineamenta* for this second synod for Africa is already published. The preparation for and the celebration of that synod will no doubt be another providential opportunity for the Church in Africa to reflect on this all important matter, in communion with the universal Church, *cum et sub Petro*.

5. The challenges on the Church are first of all on the national level. Each local Church has to work out its own project for balancing pastoral and social growth, welfare programs and socio-political awareness. A major challenge will be how to encourage the lay faithful to embrace political engagement as an apostolate for the establishment of the kingdom of God, kingdom of justice, love and peace, for the common good, guided by the Catholic Social Doctrines.
6. This will necessarily entail looking beyond our national boundaries. The problems of Africa are more and more taking regional dimensions, as the Great Lakes situation has clearly shown. The same can be seen in West Africa, (The Mano River Area of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and La Cote d’Ivoire), as well as the crisis in the region of South Sudan, Dafur, Central African Republic and Chad. In all these cases, there is also the “devil” of natural resources: petroleum, diamonds, and other minerals. The politicians have put up

regional structures, which have not been sufficiently effective, especially as the governments are themselves often at each other's throats. (Cf Chad vs Sudan, DR Congo vs Uganda/Ruanda, Liberia vs La Cote d'Ivoire.) In such a situation, the Church in the region cannot but work together, to bring peace across each other's borders. So far, the action of the Church has been very weak and of little effect on the political leaders. This is certainly a case where we have to be as simple as doves and as wise as the serpents, as Jesus recommended. Sometimes, what a national conference of bishops cannot easily say to its government could be effectively transmitted in a statement issued by a regional conference.

7. On the continental level, we can say that the Church is still at the beginning, even though SECAM was established as far back as 1969, almost forty years ago. On the political level, it seems that our leaders are beginning to be concerned, if not ashamed, about what they have made of our continent. The transition from OAU to AU, and the project of NEPAD are supposed to be steps in the direction of better management of Africa. But these are so far little more than good intentions and beautiful documents. This is perhaps all the more reason why SECAM should try to intensify its activities to bring the contribution of the Church on the continental level to bear on the problems of Africa. There is a lot of good will and many good ideas. But the resources for taking effective action are very limited. Efforts are being made, with the assistance of some of our development partners, to improve the capacity of our secretariat in Accra to respond to urgent events in different parts of Africa, including the Great Lakes Region. A simple visit can go a long way. I remember here the visit of solidarity that Bishop Silota and I made to Ruanda in 2000, at a time when our brother Bp. Misago was detained in prison under what later proved to be false accusation. That visit made a lot of impression on me.
8. In the line of solidarity, we shall need to do more on communication. We often do not know what is happening to the church under different crisis situations. We often rely on the mass media, which are often biased, if not outright misleading. For example, until I came for this conference, I did not know how much the Church in these parts has been doing for reconciliation and peace, even though I am president of SECAM. In many parts of the world, what has remained in the minds

of people is the wide publicity that the secular media gave to the “big news” that the Church in Ruanda, including even a bishop, was implicated in the genocide. The same mass media did not show up in the tribunal in Kigali when Bp.Misago, and with him the Church of Ruanda, was discharged and acquitted. For these media, that is not “news”. Even at this conference, some remarks here and there seem to indicate that some people still need to purge themselves of the calumnies spread against the Church after the genocide. I hope that this conference will be a good opportunity to put the records straight. In this regard, I strongly recommend for our reading and study the second of the three “Recent Church Documents” sent to us as background information for this meeting. It is titled: “Communique Final du Colloque sur ‘L’Eglise et la Societe Rwandaise, face au Genocide et aux Massacres, Dix Ans Apres”” On the part of SECAM, we have only recently reactivated our social communications directorate. I am sure that the office will send messages round all the conferences of Africa if it is given the material for circulation.

9. Let me conclude with a final remark on inter-religious collaboration. Coming from Nigeria, I know how important it is for religious leaders not to allow themselves to be manipulated by politicians. The best way to prevent this, and to make it possible for religious groups to work together for the common good is a sincere and effective structure for inter-religious collaboration. This should of course start with those who are supposed to be closer to us as followers of Christ. We are not unaware of the challenges of ecumenism in Africa in general. We must nevertheless try our best to draw our fellow Christians closer to us. There is also the approach to Muslims. Here in the Great Lakes Region, the Catholic Church is everywhere the dominant religious group. We should resist the temptation to feel that we do not need to open up to others. On the contrary, our numerical dominance puts a greater responsibility on us to draw others nearer for collaboration. A good and well-tried formula for this is the “National Inter-Religious Councils”. Where these are set up with sincerity of purpose, and at the initiative of the religious communities themselves, with full independence and autonomy of the government, they have been very effective for the promotion of the common good. The Inter-Religious Council of Uganda is working very well, with Cardinal Wamala as President. It can be a model for other countries around here.

