

THE CHURCH'S WORK FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The church has been in Africa since the beginning of Christianity especially in the Northern parts of Africa. Alexandria in Egypt, Carthage in Modern Tunisia, and Hippo in Algeria were vibrant centres of Christianity at a time when much of Europe was still pagan and barbarian. Ethiopia too, well known in Israel as early as in the days of King Solomon, was there at the very origin of Christianity. Among the many pilgrims who listened to Peter and the apostles on the day of Pentecost, many came from Africa.

However, in this reflection, my consideration will concern largely the church in Sub-Saharan Africa. From this point of view, it is a history that is fairly recent, largely of the last 200 years. That the classical Christianity of North Africa and Ethiopia did not cross the Sahara desert into tropical Africa, is a story of God's inscrutable ways which we cannot go into here. This is all the more significant when we note that Islam did cross the desert within the first century of its origin in Arabia. Africa had to wait for about fifteen centuries to receive Christianity from Europe, through the sea.

At all times and in every place, the mission of the church has been to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. But that gospel is not only a set of religious truths to impart but also a way of life, to lead people to live according to the truth, the truth that makes free. That is why the church has always been involved in the work for peace and reconciliation in our continent, in different ways, depending on the circumstances in which the church finds herself. In broad outlines, let us look at this issue in a historical framework.

DURING THE COLONIAL ERA:

After the famous Berlin Conference of 1884, Africa was parceled out among the major European powers. That was the beginning of the era of the European Colonial enterprise in Africa. The agreements reached in Berlin were only on paper. It took another twenty years or so before the partition of Africa became a reality in terms of the actual presence of colonial powers

in different parts of our continent. In Nigeria, for example, effective British colonial authority started on January 1st, 1900, and the whole country did not come under a unified administration until 1914. The same can be said of many other African countries.

The major colonial powers were France, Britain, Portugal, and to some extent Spain, Germany and Italy. Relevant to our discussion is the fact that these countries also generally considered themselves as Christians, at least in name.

Before the colonial powers made their authority felt in Africa, efforts had been made by many European missionaries to bring Christianity to Africa. We note here in particular the rather short lived but nevertheless significant story of the Portuguese missionary endeavours in places like the Benin and Warri kingdoms in Nigeria, as well as in the Congo, Angola and Mozambique as early as the 16th century. But it was not until the effective control of Africa by European powers that missionaries from the West began to have a serious impact on the life of our people.

The relationship between the European missionaries and the colonial powers was to say the least rather ambiguous. There is no doubt that the European colonial factor made the work of the Christian missionary easier than it was before the colonial era. This probably accounts for the perception that is often expressed that the Christian missionaries were a religious arm of the colonial enterprise. But this is only a perception which in most cases was not borne out by the facts of history. The objective behind the colonial project is certainly not evangelical in the first place. The Europeans came to Africa for clearly geo-political and economic reasons. We could say that providence was here at work, writing straight even on crooked lines.

This reminds us of the role of the Roman Empire in the spread of the early church. The Roman Empire could not by any means be described as being in favour of Christianity. And yet, the *Pax Romana* established by the pagan Roman Empire facilitated the movement of the preachers of the gospel and made it possible for a man like St. Paul to write to churches all over the Roman Empire and visit many of them. The wide use of the common *koine* Greek language all over the empire was an important element in this providential chain of circumstances. Definitely, this is God's own doing and it is wonderful in our eyes.

Coming back to the topic of our discussion, we raise the question: in what way did the Church work for peace during this colonial era? First of all, the work of human development which the church carried out especially in the areas of education and health was a major contribution to the peace and harmony among our people. Later on, with the education which the

church imparted, many of our people became alert to their dignity as human persons and began to question the whole colonial enterprise from point of view of human rights and social justice. Very often, the colonial masters were aware of this and tended to look in suspicion on the missionaries for the work they were doing among the so called “natives”. From this point of view, the church in Africa, at that time largely a foreign missionary church, actually laid the foundation in many places for the political awareness and eventual liberation struggles of the early politicians and nationalists against the imperial domination of Western powers. Thus many of the leaders of the independence struggle were products of Church run schools. This role of the church has generally not been given adequate attention and recognition.

In this regard, we should note also the role of the Church in the delayed liberation struggles in Southern Africa. In Zimbabwe and the Apartheid South Africa, the church worked consistently with other forces for the establishment of a true democracy and majority black rule. However, in the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, the Church found herself in a peculiar situation for as long as the local leadership of the Church was considered part of the Portuguese hierarchy, under the famous *padroado* arrangement. It is not surprising that the Church leadership could not be in the frontline of the liberation struggle, especially as this was largely led by socialist elements with support mainly from communist Eastern European regimes.

THE WIND OF CHANGE IN THE SIXTIES:

Just before and around the year 1960, a great wind of change blew over Africa. Different countries one after the other fought for and achieved political independence from their previous colonial masters. It was the time of euphoria and great hopes for the future, as one country after the other pulled down the colonial flags and hoisted new national flags. The hope was that our countries would soon catch up with the rest of the world. This wind of change did not leave the church unaffected. It became clear that in an independent Africa, a church totally under the control of foreign missionaries was no longer tenable. Thus the process of indigenization especially of church leadership, which had already begun, was vigorously accelerated and pursued at a sustained pace.

A major church event during this period was the 2nd Vatican Council, which was itself a Council of hope and optimism. The council spoke about the importance of indigenization in our

different local churches. It also stressed the importance of the church living up to the demands of the world of our days. This was the thrust of the document on the Pastoral Decree on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. All these challenged our local churches to get fully involved in the task of nation building, which was a major concern of everyone at that time.

This was on the whole a period of very fruitful partnership between the Church and the state for the good of the people. Church leaders gave strong support, at times even direction, to the development of the new nations, often led by rather young and inexperienced statesmen. Here one can cite examples like Cardinal Malula and the early Mobutu in Congo Zaire, Cardinal Thiandoum and Senghor in Senegal, Cardinal Yago and Houphuet-Boigny in La Cote d'Ivoire, to mention just a few.

BETRAYED HOPES

Within a decade or so, the great hopes of the 60s began to be betrayed one after the other. Many of the former nationalists who fought for independence in the name of freedom and dignity of the black man began to behave like oppressors. Many of them had great difficulties maintaining the basic parameters of a democratic system, especially as they found it difficult to tolerate any kind of opposition. The result was the chaos that followed. Things fell apart in most parts of Africa. In some cases, former comrades in arms in the liberation struggle were branded as national traitors and eliminated or clamped in jail for many years. It was the era of military rulers, one party states and dictatorial presidents. Some even claimed to be presidents for life on the specious argument that in Africa, the chief ruled for life! This is the sad story of our various military coups and counter coups, civil wars, sometimes bloody and tragic, revolutions and pseudo revolutions, internal conflicts sometimes bordering on outright genocide. Almost every country had its own share of this crisis. For example, Nigeria suffered a civil war and long period of military rule, from 1966 until 1999, with only a brief four year interlude of democratic regime from 1979-83. Congo is still not out of the woods yet. Ethiopia went through a bloody revolution from which it has not yet fully recovered. In West Africa, much later, Liberia and Sierra Leone went through very tragic conflicts. In the area of the great Lakes, the 1994 "genocide" in Rwanda was only a tragic culmination of long years of socio-political upheavals and crisis in that region of Africa. This affected the rest of the zone. Up till now, full peace and tranquility is yet to be restored.

In the midst of all this, the church stood firm. In many cases, she remained the only voice of reason in a situation of utter chaos. The leaders of the church on the whole performed much better than their counterparts on the political front. They behaved more like shepherds than the wolves running the affairs of our States. They issued very important powerful and relevant pastoral letters in place of the state propaganda with which self serving dictators tried to deceive their people. The efforts of the church to call bad rulers to order and to preach honesty and truth was not always well received by those who were directly concerned. For example, the Church found herself in a collision course with the regimes of Nkrumah in Ghana, the later Mobutu in Zaire, and Charles Taylor in Liberia. Many church leaders suffered direct persecutions. Many others had to endure indirect harassments. This was the case to some extent in Nigeria under Abacha. We can say no bishop was totally immune from the repercussion of the positions that they take.

SEEKING A WAY OUT

As the 2nd millennium drew to a close, many African countries began to seek a way out of our generalized misrule and crisis. The end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994, which almost coincided with the Rwandan genocide, was perhaps the first major positive historical step in the new Africa that we are still struggling for. This was the era of “National Conferences” meant to reorganize the political structure of different countries. The strategy of national conferences was particularly to be found in the French speaking countries, for example the Zaire now the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo Brazzaville, Gabon, Benin Republic and Togo. It is interesting that in most of them, a Catholic Bishop was chosen to be the moderator of the conference. Some of those who served in such capacities include Monsengwo in Congo Zaire, DeSouza in the Benin Republic, Kpodzro in Togo, and Kombo in Congo Brazzaville. This shows that Church leaders have left on the people an impression of not only impartiality but also competence and adequate knowledge of what ought to be done.

Unfortunately, very few of these National Conferences actually achieved their objective. The most positive example is perhaps in the Republic of Benin, where the late Archbishop Isidore de Souza brokered a peace and reconciliation process leading to President Kerekou peacefully stepping down to make way for a free and fair democratic election. The story was however not so successful in other countries like Togo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon

and Congo Brazzaville, where the dictators on ground simply manipulated the National Conferences to ensure that nothing changed. This is the stage at which we are even today.

At this point, mention needs to be made of some Church leaders who courageously entered the lion's den to seek for peace among armed belligerents. The heroic efforts of Archbishops Goncalvez in Mozambique and Odama in Northern Uganda are both material for fascinating epic stories. We should also recall the decisive roles played by Catholic prelates in the significant mediation efforts of inter-religious teams in Sierra Leone and most recently in Kenya.

A major church event that needs to be mentioned in this recent period was the African Synod whose main session took place in Rome in 1994. Justice and peace in Africa formed one of the five main topics of the synod deliberations. The Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Ecclesia in Africa*", promulgated by Pope John Paul II, offered very clear analysis, firm principles and practical suggestions for the Church to guide our actions in this all important matter. The Synod in many ways provided a good indication as regards where Africa ought to be going and what role the church is expected to play in bringing this about. The church has been very much involved in the efforts to find a way out of the generalized crisis in Africa. We are still waiting for the full results of all our efforts.

These efforts are not only on our side. The world at large is also beginning to ask a few pertinent questions about the abject poverty, as well as the intractable conflict and unrest in many parts of the world, especially Africa. The so called "international community" has designed targets for our countries to try to attain. A good case in point is the much talked about *Millennium Development Goals, MDGs*. These are rather modest targets. For example, they talk of **reducing** poverty, not eliminating it, and improving health care, not offering full health coverage. And even in these restricted targets, realities are lagging behind, on the part of both donors and recipients. Where the Church has been given the opportunity to participate, she has been able to make appreciable impact on furthering these goals. We can cite here the work of the Church in Zambia to disburse for health and education resources from debt relief mechanisms, and the massive involvement of the Church in Uganda in UNAIDS assisted programmes against HIV/AIDS. Despite the limitation in the success of these programmes, it is nevertheless important that there is the recognition that something specific must be done to rescue Africa from itself and the realization that this is in the ultimate self interest of the richer countries of

today, and of the entire human family. All these have changed the atmosphere of our nations and there is reason for some slight measure of optimism as we look at our continent today.

TOWARDS AFRICAN SYNOD II

In November 2005, Pope John Paul II convoked the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa in the twilight of his long and glorious pontificate. It was an unexpected initiative, especially as many people were still grappling with the demands of the first synod of 1994. Perhaps that is why there seems to be rather scant enthusiasm about it, compared to the massive excitement in the preparation for the first synod. Nevertheless, this is a very important project for the Church in Africa at this time.

The coming synod will zero in on the content of Chapter IV of *Ecclesia in Africa*. The theme will be on Justice Peace and Reconciliation, and what the Church should be doing in this regard. Considering our many sad experiences in the period since the last synod, this is certainly a most relevant and timely theme. We only need to think of the tragic events in Liberia, Sierra Leone and La Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa and the countries of the Great Lakes Region in the last fifteen years to appreciate the need for serious reflection on our theme. The synod will be an opportunity to reflect on our experiences, to compare notes on pastoral practices and to try to plot a way forward.

Looking around us, there is a vivid sense of a general desire from many sides to rise up from our prostration, to resolve our conflicts, address debilitating corruption, and seek peaceful ways to reform and renew our societies. We have to undertake this task in a progressively globalized world which often limits our options and obstructs our ability to seek our own solutions to our problems. Whatever our constraints, however, we cannot continue to remain "an irrelevant appendix" (EIA) on the margins of our fast moving world.

The *Lineamenta* of the synod has been distributed and is being studied on the level of the local Churches. The reports of these studies will be sent to the Synod Secretariat where a committee of selected African prelates and theologians will compile out of them the *Instrumentum Laboris* i.e. the Working Document of the synod. The session in Rome is scheduled for the later part of 2009, which will be fifteen years after the First Synod. Our hope is that this will be another providential opportunity for the Church in Africa to decisively influence

in a positive direction the process of peace and reconciliation and the establishment of peace and progress in our continent.