

Courage! Get on Your Feet, Continent of Africa

Venerable brothers!

Dear brothers and sisters!

Here is a message of hope for Africa: We have just heard it from the Word of God. It is the message that the Lord of history does not tire of repeating to the oppressed and overwhelmed humanity of every age and land, from the time that he revealed to Moses his will for the Israelite slaves of Egypt: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people ... I have heard their cry ... I know their suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them ... and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

What is this land? Is it not perhaps the kingdom of reconciliation, of justice and peace, to which the whole of mankind is called? God's plan does not change. It is the same one that was prophesied by Jeremiah, in the magnificent oracles called "The Book of Consolation," from which the first reading is taken today. It is an announcement of hope for the people of Israel, laid low by the invasion of Nebuchadnezzar's army, by the devastation of Jerusalem and the Temple and by the deportation in Babylon. It is a message of joy for the remnant of the sons of Jacob that announces a future for them, because the Lord will bring them back to their land by way of a straight and smooth road. Persons in need of support, like the blind man and the cripple, the pregnant woman and the one giving birth, will experience the power of the Lord's tenderness: He is a father for Israel, ready to take care of Israel as the firstborn (cf. Jeremiah 31:7-9).

God's plan does not change. Through the centuries and the upheavals of history, he always points to the same goal: the Kingdom of freedom and of peace for all. And this implies his predilection for those who are deprived of freedom and peace, for those whose dignity as human persons is violated. We think in particular of the brothers and sisters in Africa who suffer from poverty, disease, injustice, war and violence, forced migrations.

These favored children of the heavenly Father are like the blind man of the Gospel, Bartimaeus, who "sat begging by the road" (Mark 10:46) at the gates of Jericho. It is just along this road that Jesus the Nazarene passes. It is the road that leads to Jerusalem, where the Passover will be celebrated, his Passover sacrifice, to which the Messiah goes for us. It is the road of his exodus, which is also ours: it is the only road that leads to the land of reconciliation, of justice and of peace.

The Lord meets Bartimaeus, who has lost his sight, on that road. Their paths meet and they become the one path. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" the blind man confidently says. Jesus answers: "Call him!" and adds: "What do you want me to do for you?" God is light and the creator of light. Man is son of the light, made to see the light, but he has lost his sight, and he finds himself forced to beg. The Lord, who has made himself a beggar for our sake, passes by him: hungry for our faith and our love. "What do you want me to do for you?" God knows but asks; it wants that it be man who speaks.

He wants man to stand up on his feet, to rediscover the courage to ask for what belongs to his dignity. The Father wants to hear from the living voice of the son the free decision to see the light again, that light for which he created him. "Master, that I can see again!" And Jesus says to him: "'Go your way; your faith has saved you.' And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way" (Mark 10:51-52).

Dear brothers, we give thanks because this "mysterious meeting between our poverty and the grandeur" of God has been realized even in this synodal assembly for Africa that concludes today. God has renewed his call: "Courage! Get on your feet!" (Mark 10:49). And also the Church that is in Africa, through her Pastors, who have come from every country on the continent, from Madagascar and from the other islands, has welcomed the message of hope and the light to walk along the road that leads to the Kingdom of God. "Go, your faith has saved you" (Mark 10:52).

Yes, the faith in Jesus Christ -- when it is well understood and practiced -- guides men and nations to freedom in truth, or, to use the three words of the Synod's theme, to reconciliation, to justice and to peace.

Bartimaeus who, after he is healed, follows Jesus along the road, is the image of humanity that, enlightened by faith, sets out on the journey to the promised land. Bartimaeus, in turn, becomes a witness of the light, recounting and showing in the first person that he has been healed, renewed, reborn. This is the Church in the world: the community of reconciled persons, workers for peace and justice; "salt and light" in the midst of the society of men and the nations.

For this reason the Synod has forcefully reemphasized -- and has manifested -- that the Church is the Family of God, in which there cannot be ethnic, linguistic or cultural divisions. Moving testimonies have shown us that, even in the darkest moments of human history, the Holy Spirit is at work and transforms hearts of the victims and persecutors so that they recognize each other as brothers. The reconciled Church is a powerful leaven of reconciliation in individual countries and in the whole African continent.

The second reading offers us another perspective: the Church, the community that follows Christ on the way of love, has a sacerdotal form. The category of the priesthood, as interpretive key of the mystery of Christ and, in consequence, the Church, was introduced into the New Testament by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. His intuition has its origin in Psalm 110, cited in today's passage, where the Lord God, with a solemn pledge, assures the Messiah: "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (110:4). The reference, which recalls another, taken from Psalm 2, in which the Messiah announces the Lord's decree about him: "You are my son, today I have begotten you" (2:7).

From these texts comes the attribution of a priestly character to Jesus Christ, not in a generic sense, rather "according to the order of Melchizedek." In other words the supreme and eternal priesthood that is not of human but of divine origin. If every high priest "is chosen from among men and is made their representative before God" (Hebrews 5:1), only he, the Christ, the Son of God, possesses a priesthood that is identified with his Person itself, a singular and transcendent priesthood, on which universal salvation depends.

Christ has transmitted this priesthood of his to the Church through the Holy Spirit; thus the Church has in herself, in each of her members, in virtue of Baptism, a sacerdotal character. But -- here is a decisive aspect -- Jesus Christ's priesthood is no longer primarily a ritual one but an existential one. The ritual dimension is not abolished, but, as clearly appears in the institution of the Eucharist, it takes its significance from the paschal mystery, which brings the ancient sacrifices to fulfillment and surpasses them.

Thus, a new sacrifice, a new priesthood and also a new temple are born simultaneously and all three coincide with the mystery of Jesus Christ. United to him through the Sacraments, the Church prolongs his salvific action, permitting men to be restored through faith, like the blind Bartimaeus. In this way the ecclesial community, in the footsteps of her Master and Lord, is called to take the road of service in a decisive manner, to share completely in the situation of the men and women of her time, to witness before all to God's love and thus to sow hope.

Dear friends, the Church transmits this message of salvation always joining together evangelization and human promotion. Let us take, for example, the historic encyclical "Populorum Progressio": that which the Servant of God Paul VI elaborated in terms of reflection, missionaries have realized and continue to realize in the field, promoting a development respectful of local cultures and the environment, according to a logic that now, after 40 years, appears to be the only one able to bring the African people out of the slavery of hunger and disease.

This means transmitting the announcement of hope according to a "priestly form," that is, living the Gospel in the first person, trying to translate it into projects and deeds consistent with the fundamental dynamic principle that is love.

In these three weeks, the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops has confirmed that which my venerable predecessor John Paul II had already brought well into focus, and which I also wanted to delve into in the recent encyclical "Caritas in Veritate": It is necessary to renew the global model of development in such a way that it is capable "of including within its range all peoples and not just the better off" (no. 39).

What the social doctrine of the Church has always upheld on the basis of its vision of man and society, today is also asked of globalization (cf. *ibid.*). This -- it is necessary to recall -- must not be understood fatalistically as if its dynamics produced by anonymous impersonal forces and independently of human will. Globalization is a human reality and as such it can be changed according to one cultural position or another.

The Church works with her personalistic and communitarian conception to orient the process in terms of relationality, of fraternity and sharing (cf. *ibid.*, no. 42). "Courage! Get on your feet!" In this way the Lord of life and hope speaks to the Church and the African people, at the end of these weeks of synodal reflection.

Get up, Church in Africa, family of God, because you are being called by the heavenly Father, whom your ancestors invoked as Creator, before knowing the merciful nearness, revealed in his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Take the journey of a new evangelization with the courage that comes from the Holy Spirit.

The urgent evangelizing action that has been much discussed in these weeks also carries with it a pressing call to reconciliation, the indispensable condition for creating in Africa relationships of justice between men and for building an equitable and lasting peace in respect to every individual and every people; a peace that needs and opens up to the contribution of all persons of good will beyond the respective religious, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and social affiliations. You are not alone in this demanding mission, pilgrim Church in the Africa of the 3rd millennium. The whole Catholic Church is near you with prayer and active solidarity, and you are accompanied from heaven by the men and women saints of Africa, who with their life -- sometimes to the point of martyrdom -- have witnessed to total fidelity to Christ.

Courage! Get on your feet, continent of Africa, land that welcomed the Savior of the world when as a child he had to flee with Joseph and Mary to Egypt for safety during Herod's persecution. Welcome with renewed enthusiasm the proclamation of the Gospel so that the face of Christ might illuminate with its splendor the multiplicity of the cultures and languages of your populations. As she offers the bread of the Word and the Eucharist, the Church dedicates herself also to work, with every means available, so that no African will be without daily bread. This is why, along with the task of primary urgency of evangelization, Christians are active in the interventions of human promotion.

Dear synodal fathers, at the end of these reflections of mine, I would like to offer you my most cordial greeting, thanking you for your edifying participation. Returning home, Pastors of the Church of Africa, bring my blessing to your communities. Transmit to all the call that so often resounded in this Synod, of reconciliation, justice and peace.

As this synodal assembly closes, I cannot not renew my deep gratitude to the secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops and his aides. I express a grateful thought to the choirs of the Nigerian community of Rome and the Ethiopian College, who contribute to the animation of this liturgy. And finally I would like to thank those who accompanied the synodal work with prayer. May the Virgin Mary recompense each and every one, and obtain that the Church in Africa grow in every part of that great continent, spreading the "salt" and the "light" of the Gospel everywhere.

[Translation by Joseph G. Trabbic]