

SECAM Pastoral Departments Input on Synod Pt. 1

**SECOND SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR AFRICA OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS,
ROME, ITALY, 4TH TO 25TH OCTOBER 2009**

**INPUT OF THE PASTORAL DEPARTMENTS OF SECAM: EVANGELIZATION AND
JUSTICE AND PEACE**

1.0 Introduction

It was “in keeping with the desires of the Episcopate of Africa” (IL Preface, p. iii) that the servant of God, Pope John Paul II announced his intention to convoke a *Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops* in November 2004. This was confirmed by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI in June 2005. And “after due consultation, the Bishop of Rome, the Head of the Episcopal College and President of the Synod of Bishops”, chose as the topic for the *Assembly* (IL p. iii), the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Mt 5.13-14”).

The *Instrumentum Laboris (IL)* of the *Second Special Assembly* or simply known as the *Second African Synod* is aimed at “generating thought, prompting discussion and guiding and sustaining the collegial discernment of the Pastors, who will be gathered in synodal assembly” in communion with Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI (IL no. 2). It is for this reason that the two pastoral departments of the *Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM)* wish to make a formal submission to the Synod Fathers.

Just like she did in the case of the *First Special Assembly for Africa* held in 1994, the Church in Africa attaches great importance to the *Second Assembly*. Indeed, the commitment of the Bishops of Africa to issues of reconciliation, justice and peace goes back to “the very beginning” as noted in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the *First Assembly* (no. 122) and affirmed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the *Second* (no. 19). A quick review of SECAM efforts towards reconciliation, justice and peace in the past 40 years of its existence reveals that at the inauguration of the Symposium in July 1969, the Bishops of the continent pledged to support Pope Paul VI in his mission of peace in Africa and issued two declarations on peace and development at the end of the inaugural Assembly.

Subsequently, the Bishops of Africa issued a statement on reconciliation and penance in Africa at the end of the 6th *General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* in Rome in 1983 in response to simmering divisions and tensions on the continent. The theme of the 7th Plenary Assembly of SECAM in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo in July 1984 was “the Church and Human Promotion in Africa Today”. A Pan-African seminar was held in Lesotho in May-June 1988 on Justice and Peace, and a declaration issued on Justice and Evangelisation in Africa.

In 2000, SECAM in collaboration with the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) organised an Africa-America meeting on Reconciliation, Conflict Resolution and Civic Peace-building in Maputo, Mozambique. Later in the same year, SECAM held its 12th Plenary Assembly in Rome, Italy in September-October 2000 on the theme, “Christ our Peace (Eph 2.14): How the Church-as-Family of God may be a Sacrament of Reconciliation in Africa”. In October 2001, a pastoral letter on the topic was issued by the Symposium. The letter which is still relevant today exposes the problems, conflicts and wars in Africa, discusses the peace offered by the world vis-à-vis that offered by Christ and exhorts all the people of Africa to embrace peace, reconciliation and love. Furthermore, the study session of the 14th Plenary Assembly of SECAM held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in January 2007 was dedicated to the review of *Ecclesia in Africa* and to share ideas on how to make the *Second Assembly for Africa* a huge success.

As we shall see later, all these have contributed together to bring about “a significant change” in the African society as expressed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the *Second Assembly* (no. 19). Nevertheless “some basic, human problems” that require further discussion still exist (IL no. 6; cf. no. 14).

2.0 A Brief Summary of the *Instrumentum Laboris*

The document is 62 pages and contains 149 numbers. It is divided into four chapters, with a preface and introduction at the beginning and a conclusion and prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of Africa, at the end. The preface highlights the importance of reconciliation, justice and peace in contemporary Africa. It notes that reconciliation “goes beyond relations among persons and peoples and extends itself to all creation” (cf. Rom 8:19; IL p. iv). The continuity of the *Second Special Assembly for Africa* with the *First Assembly* (1994) and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) is emphasized in the preface and the introduction. Important notions (elaborated upon later), are mentioned in the preface e.g. the idea of personal sin, the focus on persons “on the periphery of African society”, the urgent need for reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa etc (IL pp. iii-vi).

2.1 Chapter One: *The Church in Africa Today*

2.1.1 Positive Developments since the *First Special Assembly for Africa*

The first chapter of the *Instrumentum Laboris* (nos. 5-47) “begins with a brief overview of contemporary African society in the period since the *First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops* (1994). It highlights the new context or era in which some notable achievements have been made on the socio-political level, such as “the release of people from the yoke of dictatorial regimes”, the steady emergence of “a culture based on democratic principles”, however fragile, African leaders becoming increasingly aware of their responsibility to face conflicts, mediate in countries in crisis or in search of peaceful solutions and to establish States ‘ruled by law’ etc (IL nos. 7-8).

On the ecclesiastical level, there has been an increase in number of baptisms, priestly

and religious vocations, lay movements and associations, etc. “In various ways, Africa is showing signs of a great thirst for God” (IL no. 10). Some Episcopal Conferences and dioceses in Africa have devised plans for pastoral activity on reconciliation, justice and peace. The translation of the Bible in indigenous languages has led to a renewal of interest in reading Sacred Scripture and made celebrations of the Word of God more dynamic, more participatory and more effective, and the Small Christian Communities have witnessed tremendous growth etc (IL no. 19). In general, the African society, has “undergone a significant change” since the *First Special Assembly for Africa*.

2.1.2 Negative Developments since the *First Special Assembly for Africa*

Some basic issues already highlighted during the *First Special Assembly* 15 years ago in the religious, political, economic and cultural spheres still exist. These include: the insensibility shown by leaders to the needs of their people (IL no. 6), lack of democratic principles, promotion of ethnocentrism, etc (IL no. 23), low prices of indigenous products, oftentimes determined by the buyers themselves (IL no. 25), moral laxity, corruption, materialism, the pervasion of the notion of the human family, the neglect of the elderly and the denial of a childhood etc (IL no. 31).

2.1.3 Challenges in Africa Today

Numbers 21-33 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* talk about the current challenges in Africa. Such “tasks” (cf. IL nos. 6, 20) or challenges requiring urgent attention include; i) the family; ii) the dignity of women; iii) peace and justice and the Church’s proclamation of the Gospel (cf. Lk 4.16-19); vi) the media; and v) self reliance. It is however noted that “the problems submitted to the Synod Fathers have a great impact on the Christian conscience. Because Christians are also the sons and daughters of given societies, the same problems exist in both society and the Church. ‘The Churches in Africa bear in them the fragility of the present situation of African countries at the institutional, financial, theological cultural and juridical levels’. These situations can be regrouped to fall under three main categories, political, economic and cultural” (IL no. 21).

Due to the unstable political climate and the lack of consistent agricultural policy (among others), the African economy is fragile. This results to rural exodus, overpopulated cities, unemployment, the invasion of Africa by multinational organizations in search of natural resources etc. “The situation threatens the African identity and puts in jeopardy the very fabric of African societies”

And “being grounded in culture is understood to condition the integral development of individuals and communities” (IL no. 30). But “a process organized to destroy the African identity seems to be taking place under the pretext of modernity” (IL no. 31; cf. nos. 70, 73). The explanation on the socio-cultural sphere of the continent is aimed at “safeguarding the values proper to Africa: a respect for elders; a respect for women as mothers; a culture of solidarity, mutual aid, hospitality and unity; a respect for life, honesty, truth, keeping one’s word, etc” (IL no. 30).

The last section of chapter one deals with theological reflection on the Synod topic. It points out “how ecclesial communities are being called upon to serve reconciliation, justice and peace”, namely, as “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Mt 5.13). With these symbols “Jesus urges those who hear him to transform human society through their presence and to indicate, through the example of their lives, the paths leading to the Kingdom of God, which is promised to those who are battered, broken and marginalized in society. In this manner, the Kingdom of God will appear as a land of consolation, satiety and mercy and an inheritance of God’s sons and daughters”(IL no. 39).

All this, in effect, means responding to the challenge of Jesus to love of neighbour (Jn 13.35) or to be “in love with one another” (IL no. 43). In this way, each member of the Mystical Body, the Church, will show other brethren in Africa how “to be reconciled to God and one another (cf. Mt 5.23ff; 2 Cor 5.20). The Church will then display her sacramental aspect as an efficacious sign which makes present in Africa the grace of reconciliation between God and humanity and among people themselves” (IL no. 43).

2.2 Chapter Two: *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: an urgent Need*

The second chapter of the document (nos. 48-69) describes the ‘openings’ and, above all, the ‘obstacles’ encountered by the Church and society on the road to reconciliation, justice and peace. It notes that “commitment of the faithful to the service of reconciliation, justice and peace is urgently needed” (IL no. 48). The three issues under discussion (reconciliation, justice and peace) are presented in three steps i.e. experiences in society, experiences within the Church, and what questions need to be tackled.

The socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects of reconciliation are highlighted in nos. 49-52 of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. The paragraphs on justice (nos. 55-63) describe societal problems in Africa, which include, overclouded prisons, the culture of impunity, ecology, genetically modified food, climate change, and agricultural politics, as well as the issue of women’s rights both in society and Church.

The paragraphs “on the road to peace” (nos. 63-69) give a deeper view on some of the root causes of the African crisis, addressing the issue of discrimination and disdain for African culture...“a more basic reason for the instability of societies on the continent is linked to the cultural alienation and racial discrimination, which have engendered along the course of African history an inferiority complex, fatalism and fear. A disdain of African languages and oral African literature has led to the rejection of values which are properly African. The absence of these points of reference has created instability among young people” (IL no. 66).

2.3 Chapter Three: *The Church-Family of God: “Salt of the Earth” and “Light of the World”*

The third chapter (nos. 70-102) sets forth the characteristics of the Church as Family of

God in her desire to serve as a force opening paths to reconciliation, justice and peace. It expounds on the Church-Family of God, salt of the earth, light of the World and calls “for roads to be opened to bring about reconciliation, justice and peace on the continent” (IL no. 70). The importance of inculturation for the incarnation of the Christian faith in Africa is stressed (cf. IL nos. 71, 74).

In order to draw strength from faith in Christ, active participation in the sacraments is necessary, especially, the Eucharist and the sacrament of reconciliation (IL no. 75; cf. nos. 79-80, 86); the same applies to “living in solidarity and sharing with the poor, the sick, orphans and widows, all of whom are identified with Christ (cf. Mt 25) as they transmit his love, his goodness and his compassion” (IL no. 76). “The Eucharist is the Sacrament of Love. Since Love itself abides here, there is no room for hate, vengeance and injustice” (IL no. 81); it also “reconciles Christ’s disciples to the Father and provides the healing of divisions through a penitential preparation, the exchange of the peace of Christ and the sharing of the Bread of Life, where Jesus himself nourishes the Church’s members with his Body and his Word” (IL no. 82).

The rest of the chapter highlights the areas of special concern where the Church-Family of God is called to serve African societies, namely, through her educational and healthcare institutions and programmes for development (IL no. 92), common programmes that clearly depict “the Church’s efforts for peace and the resolution of conflicts” (IL no. 95), and ecumenical dialogue with other Christian sisters and brothers, adherents of African Traditional Religion as well as Islam (IL nos. 99-102).

2.4 Chapter Four: *The Church-Family of God at Work: Witness and New Perspectives*

The fourth and last chapter of the document (nos. 103-145) is an account of what the Church’s members and institutions have already undertaken, and can still do to promote reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. All the agents of Evangelization in Africa i.e. the Bishops (nos. 107-110), priests (nos. 111-112), consecrated persons (nos. 113-114), the lay faithful (nos. 115-118) are called upon to be actively involved in the work of reconciliation, justice and peace.

Among other details, the Bishops are to intensify their prophetic role in “response to the people’s thirst for justice and peace” (IL no. 107; the priests are to help Christians, especially, through their homilies and catechesis to “heed their call to be workers of justice, peace and reconciliation” (IL no. 111); consecrated persons are “to extend the Kingdom of Christ’s justice, peace and love through pastoral work with the youth (schools, street ministry, etc.), assistance to the poor, services to women (particularly widows) and care of the sick and physically challenged (IL no. 113); and the lay faithful are to be “workers of reconciliation, justice and peace in the different associations”, movements and places where they find themselves (IL no. 118).

Apart from the above mentioned agents, Church institutions are also expected to make their contribution towards reconciliation, justice and peace, mostly by bearing “the mark

of the spirit of the Gospel whose fruits”, which are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law” (Gal 5.22-23; IL no. 119). The institutions include SECAM (nos. 121-122), Episcopal Conferences (no. 120), Justice and Peace Commissions (nos. 123-125), Major Seminaries, Formation Houses (nos. 126-127), Formation Programmes (nos. 128-130), Health institutions (nos. 131-132), Educational institutions (nos. 133-134) and Universities (nos. 135-136).

The last paragraphs of the fourth chapter (nos. 137-145) are dedicated to the various roles of the Christian faithful in the society, e.g. in politics (no. 138), in the armed forces (no. 139), in the economy (no.140), in education (no. 141), in health (no. 142), in cultural settings (no. 143), in the media (no. 144), and in international bodies or organizations (no. 145).

With series of scriptural references, the conclusion of the *Instrumentum Laboris* reiterates the need for reconciliation as a means of justice and peace, both in Africa and beyond. “The Church-Family of God in Africa, faithful to her vocation to announce the Good News of the Gospel, desires to open herself more and more to the mission *ad intra* on the continent itself and *ad extra* towards the Churches of other continents in contact with her” (IL no. 148). As mentioned earlier, the document ends with a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and the Queen of Africa.

3.0 Some Issues from the *Instrumentum Laboris* and Proposals

The document raises issues that call for reflections and solutions. They include:

3.1 Selfishness and the Thirst for Power as signs of Lack of Conversion

The first general issue raised in the *Instrumentum Laboris* is that many people in Africa continue to exhibit selfish or self-centred attitude. Selfishness, it is said:

“nurtures greed, corruption and the allurements of gain. It is the driving force in the misappropriation of goods and riches destined for entire populations” (IL no. 11).

Similarly, the thirst for power

“leads to contempt for all the elementary rules of good governance, takes advantage of people’s lack of knowledge, manipulates political, ethnic, tribal and religious differences and creates cultures where warriors are considered heroes and people need to be paid back for past sacrifices and wrongs committed. Basically, what blackens African society comes from the human heart (cf. Mt 15:18-19; Mk 7:15; Gen 4; IL no. 11).

In sum, the heart is said to be:

“the ultimate hiding place for the cause of everything destabilizing the African continent” (IL no. 11).

This clearly points to lack of true conversion on the part of Christians in Africa in spite of all the evangelising efforts of the Church. There is therefore need to reflect carefully on how the people of the continent can overcome selfishness and become truly converted to Christ both as individuals and as communities.

3.1.1 Proposal on Proclamation, Catechesis and Homilies

Since faith, which presupposes conversion, is a gratuitous gift from God, we propose that:

- Each particular Church on the African continent should critically evaluate her approach to proclamation and catechesis. The proclamation of the Christian faith or catechesis should focus on personal encounter with Christ. Indeed, we are reminded in no. 104 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* that “the core of Evangelization is a personal encounter with Jesus in daily prayer, the sacraments and the spiritual life, fully convinced that, ‘unless the Lord build the house, those who build it labour in vain’”(Ps 127.1).
- Every sermon or homily must take into “account of the concrete needs of those whom one addresses, never imposing arbitrary and insufficient interpretations but always favouring the one thing necessary; a real encounter with God for the brothers and sisters entrusted to our care”.
- There should be a deep Evangelisation so that people will re-discover their true identity as children of God, made in his image and likeness.