

Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops: New Challenge for Communications

Bishop Emmanuel Adetoyese Badejo

Coadjutor Bishop of Oyo, Nigeria

As the Second Synod for Africa takes off in the Vatican, the need for an adequate perspective of and attention to Social Communication must form part of the procedures and deliberations at the momentous event. As an outcome of the first Synod for Africa in 1994, the First Special Assembly for Africa proposed the model of the Church as Family of God built on five key pillars, correctly naming Social Communications as one of those pillars. In the final document "Ecclesia in Africa" the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, rightly emphasized that "training in the use of the media is a necessity for the preacher of the gospel" (N071). Since then much effort has gone into raising awareness about the importance of communications in the mission of the Church in Africa. More or less expertise and resources have also been put into making priests and other agents of evangelization competent in the use of the media for their apostolate depending on where one stands. Generally, although there is still a lot of ground to cover, much has been achieved. However since the last Synod, the world of communications has been made more complex by the fluid and fleeting nature of cyber communications and the internet and also by the rise and rise of the social networking facilities called the new media technologies. For this reason, communication policies, language, methods and strategies which could pass for perfect only a decade ago are only barely adequate in the present times. Even the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Assembly points out the challenge "The new technologies of information and communication are today an inescapable place for evangelization. In what ways can the Church become more involved"? (no. 20). Consequently the Church must respond and adapt to contemporary needs by reviewing and reforming her language and strategies even as the Synod reflects on the central theme of reconciliation, justice and peace.

Communications: From Means to System

The three variables in the theme of the synod essentially require a democratic approach to achieve. Justice, reconciliation and peace cannot be decreed into existence. They are attained over time by deliberate, painstaking, inter-relational engagements and exercises among peoples. This is where a correct attitude to communication is *sine qua non* to the work of the Church in the future. The new technologies of media which provides the man of today with the opportunity of self-expression and authorship compels all to an even more democratic approach and calls on the Church to jettison even in her own language the traditional instrumentalist view of the media of communications. While it was a precious concept in the recent past, it seems to me no longer adequate today for example to speak of 'training future priests in the **use** of media". The stakes today are simply much higher than that. The need is to make

"communication compliance and media immersion" part of the objectives of pastoral formation. The obligatory objective is to help future priests and agents of mission to see communications as a system to study, understand and enter into rather than an assembly of "means to be used". A user remains on the outside of the instrument whereas a system demands more integrated engagement by the subject.

From usage to engagement

The full immersion of the trainee for priestly ministry, religious life or any level of pastoral work in the challenges and implications of communication will enable such an individual to readily and fruitfully carry out in a dynamic way the proclamation of the gospel, engage in dialogue at all levels and decipher the multitude of ways in which the very existence of the Church herself presents an opportunity for effective communication. These areas include political engagement, social relations, conflict resolution and even church environment and architecture, liturgical vestments, clerical clothes and, of course, worship itself among other issues. The candidate can then more clearly conceptualize, understand and embody the Trinitarian and Christological dimensions of communication, whereby the highest form of communication is actually the presence, the person and the self-giving act of Christ. By implication Jesus did not stop at simply communicating or using the tools of communication, He became the communication of the love of God Himself. Christ then becomes the model, the one that the pastoral agent must daily embody in the process of evangelization. In today's audiovisual world, far too many opportunities of such communicative presence whereby the Church and her agents could reach otherwise unreachable members of the human community are missed or at best misused.

Continuous Updating of the Curriculum and Strategies

This fact, if accepted as valid, calls for a constant updating of the curriculum of communications at all levels of formation. Not only, the communication dimension and implication of every course of formation must be highlighted and made clear to the agent of evangelization. In effect the requisite sound scriptural and doctrinal formation will need to be completed by a certain level of conversion of attitude to communication. This implies what I call a "taking-of-domiciliary in the neighborhood of traditional and contemporary media cultures" in order that those who seek to lead others to God may themselves not be mere "communication nomads" or complete outsiders to whichever neighborhood of communications in which their followers are found. This is an all-embracing prospect regarding all forms of media. It is only with this kind of preparation that we can have a change of attitude and orientation whereby even the gap between those who are considered natives of the new media and the so-called immigrants, will no longer be so wide. It is this change of attitude that can help the agent of evangelization realize that he cannot himself be alien to the evolution of public and private discourse and engagement whether in the grassroots media, oramedia, the press, radio audiovisual or in internet communications. He knows he has not only a right but a duty to contribute his perspective to such an *agora* which has become the melting pot of guiding principles for multitudes of people in our day. This new media-compliance also turns practitioners of the various media into precious allies in his eyes as people who have a right to respect, attention and pastoral guidance in the work of evangelization. In due course, the Church will reap considerable rewards from the resultant environment because this is the new approach that can favor grassroots

reflection on an adapted theology of communication. This, I believe, is the new environment that can support and sustain the Church's new zeal and commitment to reconciliation, justice and peace.

Impetus from the *Instrumentum Laboris*

The *Instrumentum Laboris* calls the new technologies of information and communication "the new *areopaghi* of this century", a place for the formation of consciences. It then goes on to say: "The efforts of the concerned faithful in these areas to announce the Gospel values of peace, mercy, love and unity is praiseworthy. May their example inspire a multitude of Catholics to use these means in African societies to communicate reliable, credible and constructive information and messages of joy, friendship and fraternal love" (IL. No 144). This is very good stuff but more will need to be done. Pastoral agents, including Bishops, must be encouraged to *understand, inhabit and engage*, not just use, the contemporary culture of media and system of communication in order to be effective in the mission of the Church. That shift cannot wait for another synod. It will therefore not be a waste of time if the second African Synod were to consider making a strong recommendation in this area for the Church in Africa. Now is the right time!