

## **"Africa, arise!"**

### **Second Africa Synod in the Vatican. Propositions for the Continent and Its Partners**

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From 4 to 25 October about 400 bishops, consecrated persons and laypersons discussed "the Church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice and peace" in the Vatican. 244 Synod fathers, most of whom bishops, participated in the assembly; 200 of them were from Africa, 78 were listeners and experts of both genders. Pope Benedict XVI attended most plenary sessions in the Synod Hall as silent observer. At the end of their deliberations the Synod fathers handed him a list of propositions containing 57 points, the so-called "Propositiones" which the Vatican did not publicise but handed to its own media – Radio Vatican and the newspaper "Osservatore Romano" – for evaluation. It is now the task of the Pope to draft a "Postsynodal Exhortation" for the World Church. This will appear in a couple of months and is expected to contain clear political accents in view of the Synod topic and the contents of the discussions.

A couple of dozen Synod fathers allocated their five-minute presentations to the plenary to some or other dramatic absence of democracy in many African countries. They complained of infringements upon human rights, corruption and a culture of immunity from prosecution that favoured coups and violence. Besides a few positive examples such as South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania or Senegal, they saw anti-democratic systems, such as dictatorships, military governments or single-party governments, gaining ground in Africa. Some countries even utilised the death penalty to eradicate political opponents. Thus the African bishops in their propositions requested the total and universal abolition of the death penalty. Furthermore, they called upon their governments to prevent murders and abductions and to protect property. According to their analysis it is the insecurity of life and property as well as a lack of order in many African states that exacerbated emigration and brain drain and thus poverty. Unfortunately some Catholics holding high political offices also disappointed the hope for democracy and good governance that was placed in them, the bishops noted laconically. "The Synod invites such persons to repent or resign from the public arena so that they will no longer ruin the people and cause a bad reputation of the Catholic Church," the closing address stated.

One of the most pressing problems for the stability of the continent was famine, "a widely spread form (Archbishop John Baptist Odama from Gulu, Uganda). Significantly, famine did not feature in the propositions, in spite of Pope Benedict having invited the president of the food and agriculture or-

ganisation of the United Nations (FAO) as a special guest of the Synod. Jacques Diouf confirmed that food security was primarily a political issue. Today's world had enough resources, enough money and enough technology to eradicate hunger. The most important investments for the people of Africa were surely those that focused on traditional, small-scale agriculture and infrastructure. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Diouf's opinion did not provide a solution to the hunger crisis.

In terms of its availability of natural resources, Africa should be the richest of all continents. The opposite was the case, the Synod pointed out. Africans were twofold victims – firstly, victims of poor administration of natural resources by local authorities and, secondly, victims of exploitation by “foreign forces”. In the Synod hall particular mention was made of the USA, France and China in this regard. “today there exists a close relation between the exploitation of raw materials, arms trade and an intentionally maintained instability,” the propositions stated (for example, in view of the DRC). Two bishops from Chad, ranked among the ten poorest countries worldwide, reported to the plenary session of savage raw material mining at the expense of their country and its inhabitants. In the case of oil, “secret plundering” was actually taking place. In the propositions the Synod proposed to the Pope to appeal to industrialised nations as well as to African governments. The international community was to oppose illegal mining and was to ensure a fairer distribution of yields from the mining of raw materials. The African governments - also upon the increased pressure by the Church - were to draft a legal framework that considered the interests of the own population.

Many speakers of the Synod objected to the seemingly increasing arms trade with African receivers. In their propositions to the Pope the bishops wrote that they welcomed every arms-curbing initiative by the UN, the African Union and transnational regional organisations (e.g. ECOWAS for Western Africa); furthermore, they demanded a stop of illegal arms trade, more transparency in legal arms trade as well as an embargo on light weaponry, that was usually in private possession and played a particular role in the problem of child soldiers. The Synod recommended the Vatican to update its document on arms trade, which was published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and peace in 1994. The African bishops explicitly encouraged governments of the various nations to support the UN Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), that will be considered by the United Nations Disarmament Commission at the UN General Assembly on 5/6 November. Furthermore, the Church planned to become increasingly involved in national, regional and continental institutions, such as the African Union.

The Church essentially saw its task in Africa as that of conscience-building. The Catholic instrument for conscience-building in the sense of reconciliation, justice and peace was the “Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church”.

This concise social catechism which the Vatican published in 2004, according to the Africa Synod, should become compulsory in the training of priests, consecrated persons as well as laypersons in the service of the Church. Furthermore, African bishops would welcome the extensive distribution of this social doctrine. This act of conscience-building, however, served rather as a prevention of conflict and the African Church would also like to provide a "fire brigade" for the more serious cases of already raging conflicts. A proven instrument in this regard was the Church Commission for Justice and Peace. Numerous institutions have been established upon its suggestion since the Africa Synod 1994. Two high-profile organisations of the Catholic Church were to be responsible for the African Peace and Solidarity Initiative: SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (the new president of which will be the Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson).

The African bishops considered the political charging of religion a big threat to the continent. This phenomenon was currently witnessed in Somalia, Nigeria, Chad and Sudan. Politicised religion created conflict. Thus the Synod recommended an intensification of the dialogue with Islamic groups and traditional African religions. In particular with regard to Islam, African bishops were of the opinion that any form of intolerance and fundamentalism should be opposed. Of the 78 experts and listeners of the Africa bishops meeting 30 were women. Not only the female participants but also about ten bishops in their contributions focused mainly on the topic of women in Africa. Whereas the Church on this continent has thus far seen the role of women as that of brides and mothers, a widening of this horizon seems to have manifested itself at this bishops' conference and women were starting to be perceived as a driving force in the transformation of society. Thus the Synod regretted the unutilised potential of the female majority of the population: the general level of education and development of women and girls still lies far below that of their male counterparts. The Synod fathers explicitly rejected article 14(2) of the Maputo Protocol of the African Union. This article seeks to allow women the right to "therapeutic abortion" in the case of rape and incest and in cases that pose a threat to life and health. This was in conflict with human rights, the African bishops claimed. During the discussions of the Synod the problem of HIV/Aids did not carry the weight that Western media allocate to this topic. The bishops in their propositions make no mention of the use of condoms, but explicitly condemn any attempt of intentionally spreading the virus, "be it as a war weapon or through the personal lifestyle".

With respect to migration the Synod fathers noted that "the restrictive immigration laws of the World against Africans" – thus the wording in the propositions – increasingly tended to be in conflict with human rights. Europe effected its "selection" of immigrants on the basis of their education rather than their worthiness of protection, Archbishop Charles Palmer Buckle of Ac-

cra (Ghana) criticised on behalf of many. What the European asylum debate failed to consider in the opinion of Africans was the fact that migration was to be considered a human right. Also Bishop Giovanni Martinelli, who is responsible for Libya but originally comes from Italy, accused Europe of indifference in view of the refugee dramas in Africa. Illegal immigration was not to be condoned; but had its roots in deeper injustices. Through long-term development policies Europe was to ensure conditions of human dignity in the source countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia or the Congo.

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