

## **Church Life In Africa Project**

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Keynote Address

by

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### **Introduction**

I thank Fr. Kenneth Amadi sincerely for dragging me in to become part of this wonderful project taking place for a couple of days here in the Catholic Secretariat Conference Center, on Church Life in Africa. I have been asked to give a keynote address without any specific topic. I will therefore talk generally about Africa, the church in Africa and hopefully some ideas of what we could do or what young people could do to make a positive impact on Africa.

1. I will start first with a general reflection on what I call “the enigma that is Africa”.
2. Then I will speak about the futile efforts made to make Africa rise.
3. Then I will speak about the African church in history.
4. Thereafter, I will cast a general view on the church in Africa today.
5. This will be followed by some reflection on Africa in the world church.
6. We shall then assess the African church as witness to and in service of the African continent.

7. Finally, I will make my contribution to how I see the relationship between the USA Church and Africa

My remarks on each of these topics will be rather brief, nothing profound but rather simple, more like a conversation.

### **1. The enigma that is Africa**

The continent of Africa is generally believed to be the cradle of humanity. We were told that it was in Africa that the intelligent human being first emerged, in the long millions of years history of human evolution. Beyond that, human civilisation itself also very probably has its origin in our continent of Africa, because the Egyptian civilisation seems to be the oldest in our planet. There are also glories of African culture and nations beyond Egypt, either in West Africa or in Southern Africa and perhaps in Central Africa. Egypt and the North Africa was part and parcel of the ancient Mediterranean world of the Greek and Roman civilization.

Sub-Saharan Africa however, has its own history quite different. The first contact between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa that is on record, can be traced to the efforts of the Portuguese maritime explorers to discover a route to India and the far East round the coast of Africa. It was this that brought the Europeans into first contact with the African continent, stopping over places like Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Congo, Angola, South Africa, Mozambique and all on the way to India. This first contact was more or less on the basis of relative equality. This was mainly because the standard of living in Europe at that time was not much better than the standard of living in the African Kingdoms with which they had contact. The Europeans that visited Warri and the Benin Kingdoms in the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, came as visitors on equal footing. They respected the local authorities under whose power they operated.

The ignominious phenomenon of slave trade came later, resulting not only in the massive deportation of millions of Africans to far off Americas but also in the very serious depreciation of the dignity of the black man, who was seen as inferior merchandise to be bought and sold and used as beast of burden. Following slavery was also the phenomenon of colonialism. This practically meant that for the European nations gathered in a conference in Berlin in 1884, the entire African continent was a no-man's land, which they shared among themselves, drawing lines on inaccurate maps of Africa, ignoring the existence of empires, kingdoms and cultures. The colonial era continued into this past century. Africa then graduated away from colonialism in the 1960s. All these negative historical events had an impact on the image of the continent and people of Africa, even as we speak today.

This is why I talk about the enigma that is Africa. It is a continent that is politically independent but economically dependent. It is rich in human and natural resources but at the same time full of poverty and misery, due to bad human management. It would seem as if the continent is doomed to remain a backward continent. But we should not allow ourselves to be caught in such pessimism. We must continue to believe that the destiny of our continent is still in our hands. We have hope for the future.

## **2. Futile efforts for Africa to rise**

We compare ourselves with our global neighbours in the Asian continent and we wonder how come many of the Asian nations have taken their rightful place in the community of nations while we still remain lagging behind. Many political plans and ambitions have been laid out for the emancipation of Africa but somehow, they have remained futile efforts. We give just a few examples. The ambitious project of a unity of African nations that started with the Organisation

of African Unity, (OAU) which recently was transformed into the African Union (AU), continues to be a brilliant idea whose ultimate objective is to create a United States of Africa that would be a force to reckon with in our modern world. That political project has remained largely unrealised. We heard about the NEPAD, a new partnership for African development, a beautiful project which did not take off as expected. There was the idea of African Peer Review, whereby African leaders would help one another by reviewing their performances for mutual encouragement. It started and has never moved anywhere. Of recent we are hearing of efforts to improve trade across the continent of Africa. All these appear to be like simply theoretical projects, with very poor results.

The reason for all these failures is not farfetched. We must admit that Africa is still riddled by its internal mismanagement. Few countries are well managed. Then within a global environment, where external forces are not always in our best interest, the continent continues to be on the receiving end of hostile international policies. We have been lamenting the nefarious neo-colonialism from the western former colonial masters, mainly Europe, America and maybe Australia and New Zealand. But it is not only such neo-colonialism that Africa now has to contend with. Our relationship with the East has not been mutually enriching. You have the Middle East, where our relationship with the Arab nations has been rather ambiguous. When we look at the Far East, we see the Asian Tigers, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and the huge China that seem to be simply preying on Africa that is unable to defend itself. That gives us a rather gloomy picture of our continent. And this is the continent in which the Church grew up and is growing and operates.

### **3. The Church in Africa: its history**

Here, I will only speak in broad terms. We can say that the history of the Catholic Church in Africa is a story of a miracle of grace and growth.

We must start with the beginning in our ancient heritage in North Africa and Egypt, where Africa featured prominently as a major centre of the Christian faith at the very beginning of Christianity. Alexandria, Hippo, Cartage were all big centres of the Christian Faith. Africa gave the Church not only great theologians and Patriarchs but also monks and martyrs. Pope St. John Paul II has given us a beautiful summary of the glory of the Church in Africa in the first centuries of Church history in *Ecclesia in Africa*, the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation after the First African Synod in 1994. With this ancient African Church, is also the history of the church in Ethiopia and in the nearby Nubia. While the church in Maghreb Area of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia suffered heavy loss in the hands of Islam, Egypt survived to some extent even till today. Ethiopia is also an example of a Christian community that has survived the onslaught of Islam.

The first major wave of Catholic evangelisation in Sub-Saharan Africa dates back to the 15-16 centuries, with the Portuguese adventures of exploration of a sea route to India. The Portuguese traders and explorers had some missionaries on board who evangelised various points along the coast of Africa. Nigeria is part of the beneficiary of this contact in the story of the journey of Warri and Benin of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a Church that unfortunately practically went out of existence. The same applied to efforts on the coast of Ghana and Senegal. On the other hand, Cape Verde, Angola and Mozambique were areas where the Portuguese first evangelisation did not completely disappear. Some years ago, these countries were celebrating 500 years of unbroken presence of the church in their lands.

At that time, we in Nigeria were celebrating only the first centenary in many places. That was the second evangelisation that started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first evangelization involved only Catholic missionaries since protestant reformation had not started. The second missionary presence in Africa, on the other hand, was characterised by

the divided Christian Church involving Protestant and Catholic missionaries. It was also linked with the colonial enterprise. These two elements, dividedness and colonial era, had their negative impacts on the results of the missionary activities of the Europeans in our Continent. However, despite all these negative influences, the miracle of God's grace worked for the Catholic Church in Africa throughout this period. The Nigerian story is the most typical case where, between the year 1900 and the year 2000, the Church has grown tremendously, a growth that is generally agreed to be a record in the entire history of Christian evangelization globally. That is the history of the Christian Church in Africa.

We must not forget what we have said that the Christian Church that was brought to us, especially in Sub-Sahara Africa, was a divided Church, by Catholic and protestant missionaries. This was later made even more complex by the emergence of various forms of African Instituted Churches, which in Nigeria we used to call the Aladura Group of Churches, or White Garment Churches. Then in the last couple of decades, we are witnessing the explosion of the Pentecostal movement, whose membership are mainly poached and drawn from the existing Christian Churches. The result is the Christian Church in Africa that is very badly divided almost a tower of babel. The Nigerian situation is a typical scenario.

#### **4. The African Catholic Church Today**

The Catholic Church started in Africa as a *missionary Church*, namely, a church founded and run by foreign missionaries, who courageously and zealously worked for the conversion of our continent. Here, we must remember, recognize and celebrate the hard work of the classical missionary institutes who took on the burden of evangelization all over Africa, with the direction and support of the Propaganda Fide Congregation. Worthy of mention is also the fact that the missionaries

worked under the umbrella of the different colonial powers. This was in some places positive and some other places negative.

But whatever the case, the church took root and gradually grew from missionary church to become known as *young churches*. This referred to the fact that the hierarchy was local and new, and the membership was largely of young people. This was the situation of the Church just before and during the independence movement in Africa in the 1960s.

Today however, we can no longer call ourselves a young Church. We are an *adult Church*. Most of the hierarchy in Africa now are from the indigenous clergy, both circular and religious. We now know that we can stand on our own as an adult Church, not waiting to be spoon fed by anyone. It is also a Church that has firm structures. We need to see how the number of dioceses has continued to grow and each diocese has established regular diocesan structures; Church buildings, educational institutions, religious institutes, seminaries and religious formation centres: all these have been spreading all over Africa. The example of Nigeria again is more than typical.

The first African synod of 1994, was a providential opportunity to put our ideas together. That synod came out with the notion of the Church as Family of God. Thus, the Church in Africa sees itself as a family with different members; clergy, religious, and laity. And it has also become a Church that is missionary, ready to spread the faith, starting from Africa following the challenge of Pope Paul VI in 1969 that Africa should be missionaries to herself. And so African priests and missionaries are now moving across the African nations on the project of missionary work and evangelisation. The African Church has also launched into missionary work *Ad Gentes*, not minding the needs of our own Church and not allowing our poverty to stop us from carrying out God's work.

The Church in Africa tries to seek common grounds to work with other religious communities, in the service of our people in need. In this regard, we mention three areas:

- i. The African Traditional Religion. Whether they are well organised or not, we must acknowledge the importance of the ATR which are the carriers of the African religious values and culture. In this regard therefore, the Christian Church should not deny or destroy anything that is good, true and valuable in the culture of our people. Indeed, it is part of our evangelisation process of inculturation to highlight these values and promote them in the life of the Church in Africa.
- ii. Then there are the other Christian groups who are operating in Africa as mentioned already above. It is not always easy to find common ground with many of the protestant Churches, especially the more recent “Pentecostal” groups. Everywhere effort is being made to work out some form of common structures for common witness and life. This has various levels of success. In Nigeria, we have the Christian Association of Nigeria, (CAN) which is an important forum for all Christians to try to work together. We know of course these efforts are always full of challenges but we cannot give up on the ecumenical imperative wherever we are.
- iii. Finally and most significantly, is the world of Islam. In some countries, it is the dominant religion, in other places they are in the minority. In a place like Nigeria, we have a 50-50 relationship between Christians and Muslims. For a long time, the Christian faith carried out its activities along with Muslims, targeting largely the large number of adherents of our traditional religion. Now, more and more, most of them are taking a position for either Christianity or Islam. Now, the pool



of Traditional Religion is fast drying up. This means that we can no longer avoid direct relationship with Islam, if we are to avoid direct clash and confrontation with them. Our experience in Nigeria in this regard is instructive. I have been involved in this effort for more than 50 years. And I am sorry to say that things were easier 30 years ago than they are now today. There is a fear that polarisation between Christianity and Islam is growing rather than reducing. This is largely due to the activities and utterances of the extremist religious groups, especially those who are armed groups, like **Boko Haram** and other bandits. If government were to carry out its own duty of ensuring peace in the nation, most of these problems would be easier to handle. We cannot give up the efforts; the reality is before us. The good news is that the vast majority of Christians and Muslims in Nigeria and beyond really wants to live together in peace. The minority of fanatics, who don't believe in harmony and living together in peace, must not be allowed to have the upper hand or the final say.

## **5. Africa in the World Church**

The rest of the Church has taken note of the phenomenal growth of the Church in our Continent; how vibrant it is, the growth of membership, and the increasing structures that we are able to show. This is so much that Pope Benedict once ventured to call Africa the “spiritual lung of the Church”. That lung unfortunately can be infected and perhaps is already being infected. But whatever the case, Africa has become an adult member of the Church family of God. We have begun to think for ourselves. The idea of an African theology, and an African way of living the Catholic faith is no longer contested. The only problem is that we are not making enough effort to show what we are. I believe that no one is stopping us from building our own identity. From my own

experience, I can say that even the Holy See and the Vatican have given wide range for us to do our own theology, provided it is done with full sense of responsibility.

Africa also has entered into the missionary movement of the universal Church. The first entry of the African Church in this regard was when Africans became members of missionary institutes that sent missionaries to different lands starting with Africa itself. We now have many Africans in groups like the Spiritans, Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the white Fathers, Dominicans, Jesuits, Claretians etc. We notice, for example, that Africans are involved in the leadership positions in these international missionary societies. The present Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers is an African, just as that of the Missionaries of Africa, also called the “White Fathers”. What we say of priests can be said also for the female religious. For example, an African sister, a Nigerian, has been the superior general of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, with generalate in Rome. In other words, we are at home in the church of God. By the same token, even in the very leadership of the Universal Church, the record of our senior brother, the late Cardinal Gantin and our illustrious uncle Cardinal Francis Arinze, has shown that Africa can be effective at the highest level in the church life. We have also had other cardinals who have been at the head of major dicasteries of the Holy See; Peter Cardinal Turkson at the dicastery for Integral Human Development and Robert Cardinal Sarar, who took charge of the Congregation for Divine Worship for quite some years. In the same vein, we are watching with admiration and pride the growing number of Africans featuring in the College of Cardinals. It will no longer be a surprise if an African were to emerge on the Cathedra of Peter.

## **6. The African Church: Witness to and Service of the African Continent**

In the light of the above assertions, the question then arises: “If the church in Africa can be seen to be vibrant, growing into an adult Church, what impact is it having on the continent of Africa that is so much in need of redemption and rescue?”

In many countries, when everything seems to have broken down, it is often only the church that is left with a minimum of order and service. The responsibility on the church is great to be witness to how our society is to be managed. There is also a responsibility, in the language of Vatican II *Lumen Gentium* to be a Sacrament of Salvation to our people; Sacrament in the sense of sign and instrument. As sign, people should see in the church how the society ought to be, especially in terms of solidarity, honest management of resources and the upholding of the dignity of the human person. The church must also be an instrument of the salvation of our people by being actually involved in this regard.

It must be put on record that right from the beginning, even in the earliest time of the missionaries in Africa, the church has always been involved in human development of the people. The church not only preached the gospel and established Catholic communities but also served the entire community, not only those who accept the message of faith that we preached.

Nigeria is a good example. The church started the whole project of schools to educate the young elements. Education for the girl child, women education was largely pioneered by our Catholic female religious. In Nigeria, the record of the good old Catholic schools, especially in Eastern Nigeria, has remained very well known. Therefore, the Church has not been idle.

Of recent, the Church in Africa has tackled African issues head on. This is very clear in the two African synods, the first in 1994 and the second

in 2009. The emphasis was not only on the proclamation of the Gospel but also on good governance, reconciliation, and peace. Both synods made these issues of capital importance. The SECAM, which is the Episcopal body that speaks and works for the church in Africa, has always been involved in issues that concern our continent. SECAM has been involved in advocacy visits to countries of Europe and America, advocacy for better treatment and greater justice in the international relations. Much has been done by SECAM to plead for reduction, if not outright cancelation of unjust burden of debt on our people.

Today, SECAM has established a formal relationship with the African Union in Addis-Ababa, which gives it a forum for interfacing with our political leaders. I am not too familiar however with how much is going on at that level. But the Church in Africa must continue to give prophetic witness in our continent that is so poorly managed. We are part of the people that is on the receiving end of poor government. We have therefore the right and duty to speak out against injustice and dishonesty. We should also seek ways and means of reaching out with our hands of fellowship to our political leaders, in the context of our own principled positions. Unfortunately, our political leaders often find it difficult to welcome the partnership of the church, precisely because of their reluctance to accept certain basic values which we insist upon. It is important however, that we continue to find ways and means of getting involved, for the sake of the people. Here we have to be as wise as serpents and as simple as doves.

Africa needs the Church because if the Church does not reach out, who else would, especially in the area of promoting justice, peace and unity in Africa? Here we must stress the importance of the African laity. In these matters, the Church cannot be the clergy, less still the bishops. It is the lay faithful who are supposed to be the Church in those arena where issues of peace, justice, unity and political harmony are discussed and decisions taken. This is why it is important that the

African lay faithful are well trained in the Catholic-social doctrines and are empowered to act on their own informed initiative, knowing that in these areas, they are the Church. The lay faithful should not be waiting for instructions from the bishops in the area of political engagement. They ought to know what the Catholic social doctrine is and act accordingly. In this regard it seems we still have a long way to go.

Similarly, the African laity should do all they can to work in solidarity and collaboration with others in the nation in order to promote the spiritual values which we have in common with other religious communities. In this, we think of both fellow Christians and where it is appropriate also with Muslims who are citizens of same nations with us. In most countries, Catholics alone cannot win the political battle because we don't control majority votes. But the church can always be effective and active anywhere, even when we are in the minority because the principles of the Catholic social doctrine are not doctrines for Catholics alone, but for the common good of our nations. We should not hesitate to propose those values to others, so as to help to rescue our nations.

## **7. The Church in Africa and the United States of America**

This program, Church Life Africa, is interested in raising also the issue of relationship between the church in Africa and the United States. Here we have a major reference point in the 2001 document of the United States Bishop's Conference called "A Call to Solidarity with Africa", a very beautiful document which even after 20years is still very valid and very useful. It is interesting and encouraging that only last year, the same agency of the USA Bishops Conference has come out with another follow up document; "Renewed Call to Solidarity with Africa". This second document simply reminded the American Church of the commitment made 20 years ago, showing that still much needs to be done.

In the meantime, there has been quite a lot of contacts between the Church in Africa and the Church in the USA. Much of the contacts however, have not been on the level of continent to continent as one would have wanted. But many Bishops' Conferences in Africa have established formal relationships in one form or the other with the US Bishops' Conference. The USA Bishops conference agency for development, the famous "Catholic Relief Services" (CRS) is operating in many parts of Africa. Through it, the American Church has continued to support the efforts of the Church in Africa. But even this too needs to be more clearly defined. In other words, it must be clear that the Catholic Relief Services, as an agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the USA, is indeed working also in the name of the Catholic Church in Africa, not just as an international NGO that is doing its own thing. I must say that the more recent country representatives of CRS in our country are well aware of this and are trying their best to maintain good contact and relationship with the Catholic Church here in Nigeria, through the Bishops' Conference. That is how it should be. That does not stop them from helping or serving people who are not Catholics. After all, we too serve non-Catholics in our social services.

In the meantime, since the beginning of this millennium, we have had more reasons to talk about the presence of Africans and the African Church in the United States. At first, we were mainly concerned with African clergy or religious who are working "on mission" in the United States. They are supposed to go there as missionaries. But are they seen as missionaries? That is a big question. It is important that the hierarchy of the United States and the hierarchy of Africa come out with a transparent blue print and guideline on this issue. This is so that the African priests or religious male and female who are working in dioceses in America are not seen simply as African immigrants looking for job. They ought to be welcomed as missionaries who are in America to serve and help the American Church in the task of evangelization. On

this, there is need for an open discussion and common reflection between the Church in Africa and the Church in the United States.

But I believe that the discussion should go beyond clergy or religious working in church circles in the United States. We must also take note of the many African lay faithful who have moved to the United States on their own and are well integrated into the American environment. Many of them are performing admirably well and giving a good name for their African homelands in America. Some of them manage to organise themselves as African communities and in some cases have pastoral care given to them. We commend those American Bishops who take this matter seriously. We believe that they should recognise that the African lay Catholic who lands in the United States is generally very deeply religious. His or her presence in the local Catholic community should be encouraged, so that they can be quiet and effective missionaries in the environment in which they find themselves. For this to happen, there should be deliberate effort to give warm welcome to all Catholics who find themselves in local churches in the United States. I do not know whether the US Bishops Conference has any policy on this matter. The Nigerian or the Kenyan or any English-Speaking African fits generally well in the local parish community. But many do have some peculiar pastoral needs that should be acknowledged and addressed. Failure to do this generally discourages them from continuing to be active in the Catholic Church. The result is that we have cases of many of them who simply fall back on the many Nigerian and African Pentecostal churches that have taken root in the United States. This matter requires urgent attention.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges facing the Catholic Church in Africa have been the subject of many meetings, conferences and seminars since many years. But most of these forums have been under the auspices of formal

ecclesiastical organisations. On the level of the hierarchy, there have been regular meetings; national, regional and continental. Associations of religious institutes of consecrated life have been doing their own reflections on similar topics and issues. Copious materials have emerged from the meetings of our theological, biblical and pastoral professional study sessions, with volumes of publications and reviews, most of which are sitting on shelves in private and public libraries. Ideas are not lacking; only concrete implementation remains problematic.

But this Church Life project is a conference with a difference, especially with its target and focus on the youth and the laity. We have good reasons to hope that this project will engender a robust discourse on practical and accessible levels that will produce fruits, fruits that will last. May the Lord give success to the works of your hands and minds.