

The Pope's Visit to Africa

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Pope Benedict XVI will be in two African countries this March for his first trip to continental Africa as pontiff. It is surprising that this imminent visit has not generated any interest in both Africa and outside the continent. Whatever be the reason for this apparent lack of enthusiasm about this visit, like most papal trips one hopes that this visit will be significant coming more than a decade after the last one by Pope John Paul II to Africa in 2008. The highlight of this visit will be the publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2nd African Synod coming up later this year in Rome, and the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the evangelization of Angola. This five days visit (17-23 March) is expected to draw attention to the state of the Catholic Church in Africa within the wider question of the African condition, and the role of the Church as an instrument of peace and justice. It will also highlight the great work that the Catholic Church is doing in Africa in the areas of health care, development initiatives, and the drive towards more prosperous and stable democracies in Africa. There is also the concern over how the Catholic Church in Africa is enhancing the agency of Africans in stimulating the needed response to change the contoured face of Africa. It is significant that the theme the Pope chose for the Second Special Assembly for Africa is, "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." This no doubt underlies the prophetic role which the church is called to play in the very challenging contexts of faith practice in Africa.

The Church in Africa has come of age. The latest edition of church statistics published by the Vatican shows that the number of Catholics increased from 1.131 billion to 1.151 billion between 2005-2006, representing an increase of 1.4%. The statistics confirmed what many people already know that the church in Africa is witnessing a new wave or resurgence not only in the Catholic faith, but also in the Protestant churches, the evangelical and Pentecostal movements, and the blossoming African Independent Churches. Africa, for instance, has overtaken the United Kingdom as the largest Anglican community outside Europe. Within the Catholic Church, while seminaries are closing down in the West, and parishes are being closed in many dioceses in Canada and the USA, seminaries are being expanded in many African countries, while many prospective seminarians and aspirants are

being turned down because of the lack of facilities to accommodate them. The seminaries and convents are bursting at the seams. Many bishops can no longer meet the ever growing demands for new parishes and new dioceses in many parts of Africa. The churches in Africa are witnessing a new harvest and a new Pentecost with an exponential rise in attendance. Churches are packed to the full every Sunday with robust and dynamic liturgies, which testify to the fact that the apprehension of Christianity in Africa is at the level of cultural identity, hence the new cultural imagination that is being created by the presence of the Christian faith in the continent.

The number of seminarians in Africa has grown to astonishing 23,580 in 2007 from a little over 580 when Pope Paul VI made his first visit to Africa in 1968. African priests and religious are now providing services in many North American and European churches in what appears to be a reverse mission from the global South to the North. Many people are convinced that we are at a turning point in the Christian movement, as global Christianity grapples with what is obviously a post-Western Christianity being influenced by a post-Christian West. There is thus a need for a realignment of forces and charisms in Catholicism, as well as a re-evaluation of the relationship between the heartland Christianity of the West and the frontier Christianity of the Global South where the future of Christianity is presently being determined.

In his 1994 Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* which was released in Yaoundé, Cameroon, Pope John Paul II wrote this about the church in Africa; "Indeed, this continent is today experiencing what we call a sign of the times, an acceptable time, a day of salvation. It seems that the 'hour of Africa' has come, a favourable time ..." (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 6). The Pope's expressions: 'historical moment of grace', 'a sign of the times', 'an acceptable time' and 'hour of Africa' indicate his conviction that the Church in Africa has come of age. Time has come for African Christians not only to celebrate the Christian faith as gift but to use the liberating force and transformative grace of the Gospel to bring about a new Africa and a new way of being Church. It is true that if allowed to take root in people's hearts, the Good News of Jesus Christ will set them free from poverty, hunger, illiteracy, sickness and other debilitating conditions that have plagued this beautiful continent. This is, therefore, the favoured time to re-construct the disfigured image of Africa by interpreting the signs of the times and listening to what the Spirit is communicating through this historical moment.

There are three challenges which African Christianity faces which one hopes the Pope's visit could bring to the fore. The first has to deal with a question of identity and is more concerned with the inner dynamics of being Church and the problem of the autonomy of local churches within the universal Catholic family. The second is the question of accountability broadly conceived; the third point is the challenge of religious freedom and inter-religious dialogue with African Traditional Religions and Islamic religion. The other concern here is the apparent state of Catholicism within global Christianity: Is being Catholic perceived today, within societies where the Roman Catholic Church has a strong footing, as a positive force for change and religious and spiritual regeneration?

The question of the autonomy and identity of the Church in Africa is not a specific challenge but a common concern as many local churches struggle with maintaining a balance between contextualisation and communion in a Catholic faith that is still weighed down by a very synchronizing Church authority at the center. This debate was very prominent ten years ago between Cardinal Walter Kasper and the then Cardinal Ratzinger. The debate led to the publication of two books by both prelates (*Leadership in the Church: How Traditional Roles can Serve the Christian Community Today* by Kasper; and *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* by Ratzinger) defending their opposing positions on whether the center has priority over the local. While I do not wish to get into the debate, it is obvious that a centralising tendency or a universalizing theology which is so often the case in the Catholic family is not a healthy means of promoting autonomy and identity of local churches to meet the specific challenges facing them. This is particularly true in liturgical, and moral issues, as well as administrative and pastoral policies which have to deal with specific local challenges and problems. Does being Catholic mean being the same, having a monolithic culture, and a common curriculum for clergy and religious? Is a universalizing tendency not a tidal wave which will sweep away creativity and dynamism in local churches; extinguishing local customs and ancient traditions' ability to meet the challenges they face? Is it not true that the context is the place where the universal is potentially present and that Catholicism is universal to the extent it makes the particular part of the validating claim of any universality?

One would expect that the Pope will listen to the African Catholics' concern for greater autonomy with regard to the structure of the Church, which will bring about a

servant leadership among local clergy who ought to hold in balance their double loyalties both to the Pope as the Vicar of Christ as well as to the needs and faith context of the faithful which demand their attention and utmost commitment. One has the impression that African bishops are legates of Rome and are more concerned with how they please papal nuncios and improve their chances of climbing higher on the ecclesiastical ladder than how they can improve the practice of the faith in Africa relative to the social context. The Pope, we hope, will listen to the silent cries of many African Catholics for greater freedom to live their faiths as Africans and not on European terms and conditions because a faith that does not become culture is very false.

The Catholic Church in Africa has been blessed with the vibrancy of the women folk. The effective evangelization in Africa calls for greater involvement of African women in African Churches where women are treated as second class citizens and hold any position at the mercy of a male dominated hierarchy and leadership across the board. Such treatment of women in the Catholic churches in Africa parallels the patriarchal cultural frameworks that furnish and legitimize the ongoing marginalization of women through various uncritical cultural assumptions. There is also the need for greater involvement of the lay faithful and local priests in the selection of bishops, as well as an ongoing evaluation of the ministries of bishops in the light of how they promote the practice of the faith and its relevance to the concrete life situation of the people. This is the challenge of accountability.

The Church in Africa is being called at this moment of grace to account to the Lord for how she has used her gifts, her growing number of faithful, and the riches of the Gospel to transform both the Church in Africa and the wider African society. This accountability extends also to the use of the temporal goods of the Church. Many laity in Africa complain that they never get from their bishops or priests annual financial statements showing clearly how their offertory and donations have been used. This 'don't ask, don't tell' policy does not make the church credible in challenging the growing high-handedness and lack of accountability in many countries in Africa. The Pope hopefully will challenge his African brother bishops to follow the lead of the Vatican by publishing annual financial statements.

Catholicism in Africa is in dire need of an inner renewal of the clergy and religious who sometimes live above the levels of the people they serve, and whose lifestyles contradict the call of the church in Africa to live simply and to identify with the social conditions of the

African faithful. While many priests and religious continue to render heroic services and making majestic sacrifices in many dark alleys and hidden corners, as the voice of many voiceless poor in Africa, this has become in many parts of Africa the exception instead of the norm. Many church officials today in some African countries receive donations of SUVs, huge financial gift from public officials which only continues to erode their authority and undermine the simplicity and poverty of spirit required to arrest the moral and spiritual decline in a continent that is awash in religious sentiments, but still far from concretely reflecting these sentiments in the public and ecclesial contexts.

Many people in the West are calling for a paradigm shift in Western theologies to meet the new challenges of Western Christianity since the boundaries are shifting in a very fundamental way. If these Western theologies are no longer meeting the challenges of today's Western Church or if the challenges of the Churches in the West are no longer being met by a recycling of the same theological frameworks, are there valid grounds to propose those theologies to the Global South? It is still surprising to many Catholic theologians that the curriculum for the training of priests in African Catholicism is made in Rome, thus making it difficult for local churches in Africa to train their priests and religious to understand the cultural and social context of the practice of the faith. One hopes that the Pope will consider the time appropriate to remove the tag of 'Mission' churches on the churches of Africa. I do believe that most churches in Africa are no longer mission churches since they are self-perpetuating, and can be self-sustaining if they shed themselves of the very expensive replication of Western churches' administrative bureaucracy, the use of imported expensive Western vestments, liturgical vessels, sacramentals, tabernacles, altars, and expensive church architecture, chanceries and rectories. A vulnerable church in Africa which uses the things discoverable in the African world, to build African faith communities, sensitive to the economic limitations of the faithful will be a sustainable church. If many African Independent churches and many Pentecostal and Orthodox churches in Africa are surviving without any support from the West, why wouldn't the Catholic churches of Africa survive without sacrificing their creativity because of their financial dependence on Rome? It is in this regard that many African theologians are hoping that the Pope might reconsider having the Synod in Rome in the fall and instead select an African country to host the Synod. When one thinks of the heavy cost that this will impose on the bishops from Africa and their

people, it is obvious this does not make economic, ecological, and biblical sense. Having the Synod in Africa will be an Incarnational way of identifying with Africans by taking a tent with the ordinary and suffering people of this continent. It will also show that the Catholic Church is not treating Africa in a paternalistic way.

Beyond the internal challenges facing African Catholicism is the external challenge which has to do with religious freedom and inter-religious dialogue. Are African Catholics still operating from the worldview of African Traditional Religions or is the faith still superficial, a mere veneer over a deeply rooted traditional worldview? The task of inculturating the Gospel in Africa is still far from being realized, whether with regard to liturgy, morals, ecclesiastical structures, the criteria for clerical life, pastoral practices, translation of Biblical and liturgical texts etc. It seems that the project of inculturation is a landmine for many practitioners as they struggle to sometimes abandon the fruits of their cultural studies in order to find a way of fusing African Christianity into the norms and categories of the institutional church. The challenge of syncretism in African Catholicism remains a real one as Africans look for multiple appeals to traditional religions outside of Christianity to find answers to the questions of witchcraft, ancestral communion, sicknesses, childless marriages, personal, family and communal misfortunes, mental health issues, female genital mutilation, circumcision, demonic attacks, sorceries, sexual identities, and other limit situations which are not addressed in traditional Western Christianity.

There is also the challenge of inter-religious dialogue with Islam. According to a report on religious liberty in Africa published by the *Aid to the Church in Need* in July 2006 the greatest challenge facing Christianity in Africa is the question of religious liberty. A sample of some of the findings of the report will reveal the extent of this challenge. For instance, although with the ending of a number of civil wars the more intense waves of violence characterizing Angola, the Ivory Coast and Sudan have ceased, the conflict in Uganda that also caused the death of the Caritas worker Okot Stalin and resulted in an atmosphere of persecution addressed at the Catholic Church, is not by any means over. While countries like Morocco and Tunisia are looking for new ways to promote dialogue and tolerance between Christians and Muslims, Algeria in 2006 approved a law punishing conversion from Islam. The Catholic Church, the Protestant community and the Seventh Day Adventists are

currently the only non-Islamic denominations acknowledged and allowed to operate in this country.

The same could be said of a country like Egypt. In spite of a degree of openness shown by the government, the clash between Islamic extremists and Orthodox Copts, often the victims of threats, attempts at forced conversions and mass attacks, now seems to have become radicalized in Egypt. Although the Egyptian constitution guarantees freedom of worship, acknowledging all creeds and forms of cult, the authorities effectively impose restrictions and obstacles to freedom of worship for believers in faiths that are not Islam. Islam is the official religion in the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Shari'a is the main source of legislation, in fact, any revision of the laws and various codes is approved by the law professors in the Al-Azhar district -- universities and mosques - in Cairo, linked to conservative and in some cases extremist Islam. Even if belonging to Islam, every religious and civil practice conflicting with the Shari'a is forbidden and is subject to the imams' and the sheikhs' rigid and binding control. Although the Orthodox Copts represent about 15% of the population, in the parliamentary assembly their presence is reduced to less than 1%. They are in practice excluded from even secondary level appointments within the state administration and public education. Income from taxation is used for building and restoring mosques, while other Christian places of worship do not receive public funding.

Radical Islam is not simply a problem of North Africa where African Christians are still nostalgic about the ancient Christian civilizations that were wiped away beginning from the 6th century, radical Islam is also spreading in sub-Saharan Africa. Radical Islamic advance is also perceived in Kenya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad, Cameroun, Uganda, Sudan and above all in Nigeria, where the enforcement of Shari'a Islamic law tends to also be applied to non-Muslims and has caused continuous tension often resulting in attacks on the Christian communities causing dozens of victims on both sides. The recent violence between Muslims and Christians in the Northern Nigerian city of Jos in October 2008 is a good example of the tinder box which the religious tension in Northern Nigeria has become. In Angola, one the countries where the Pope will visit, the conflict between the Catholic Radio Ecclesia and the government has not been solved. This radio station -- which has been broadcasting since 1954 and is the most listened to independent radio station -- has for years hosted programs that criticize the government, addressing issues often ignored by other national media, such

as, for example, the clashes in the Cabinda region, the conflicts for control over diamond trafficking and the opposition's policies. This radio station can only broadcast in the Luanda region (that is the capital of Angola), and for years has unsuccessfully requested authorization to cover the entire national territory. Since the month of November a number of its programs have been broadcast by Vatican Radio so as to also be heard outside Luanda.

What is obvious is that the Church in Africa has the large membership, a very passionate following, and the inner resilience that comes from the Gospel to meet these challenges. Unleashing the inner strength of Catholicism in Africa, and the enthusiasm of African Christians for Christianity will demand finding a balance between innovation and tradition, contextualization and centralization, and the dynamic cultural creativity in African Christianity, and the continuity of the rich history of the Christian faith beyond Africa. The Pope's visit will be significant not by the beauty of the liturgies that he celebrates but by concrete gestures he makes in this direction, and the words that he will say to Africans who still continue to hold on to the faith as the only thing that will never fail them even as many other things around them continue to display signs of instability and decay.