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Reflections on the special session of the Synod of the African Bishops

by Germano Grachane, C.M. Bishop of Nacala

The theme of this 8th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops was "*The Church in Africa and its evangelizing mission as we move toward the year 2000: You shall be my witnesses, (Acts 1,8).*"

It was an indescribable happiness and an invaluable grace for me to have the privilege to participate in this Synod, and not only for being my baptismal experience of a Synod, but, most of all, because it was a Synod that brought to light the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa, whose mission is "*the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity 1.*"

But, in a particular way, the evangelizing mission is also the mission of the Congregation of the Mission. For this reason, the grace of having participated in this Synod, was also a particular grace to rediscover the specific contribution that the Vincentian vocation gives to the evangelization of Africa as the year 2000 approaches, taking into consideration the situation of the continent; its history; its present and its future; its social, cultural, political and economical situation. Truly, the general theme of the Synod (evangelization) or its five subtitles (proclamation, inculturation, justice and peace, dialogue and the means of social communication) were a direct provocation, a challenge and an interpellation today to all the Congregation of the Mission in the African continent. This current interpellation of the Synod to the Congregation of the Mission in Africa, was particularly strong regarding the Synod's unanimous statement on the need to create an African clergy, zealous in the evangelization of this continent whose nations and people, regardless of the different situations, have the common denominator of being formed by a multitude of authentic poor people: a clergy invested with the spirit of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who made Himself poor, humble, gentle and obedient for our love, is what the Synod says almost literally.

For me, a Vincentian African priest participating in the Synod, this was a singular opportunity to understand again my Vincentian vocation and the Vincentian style to practice priestly-episcopal ministry, a style characterized by the five fundamental Davidic stones that are revealed as more necessary today than ever in the combat of the faith and of the mission.

In 1990, I participated, behind the scenes, in the Synod on clergy formation, as President of the Episcopal Commission of Mozambique for Seminaries and vocations.

The Conference of the Bishops of Mozambique proposed my name as delegate of the Synod some months after my episcopal ordination in June and some months before that Synod. Due to the lateness of the proposal, it was not possible for the General Secretary of the Synod to replace the name of the former President of the

Seminaries' Commission with mine -- the new President and already functioning as such at the time of the Synod. But, in November, 1993, exactly six months before the African Synod, all the Episcopal Commissions were renewed and I ceased being the President of the Seminaries' Commission to become the President of the Commission for Evangelization, Catechesis and Faith. With this title of President of the Commission for Evangelization I was elected by the Conference of Bishops among the six delegates to the African Synod, whose main and unifying theme was the evangelization of the African continent.

From my experience of this providential moment of grace that was the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, gathered together *cum Petro et Sub Petro*, I got to retain some of the best aspects of the *mirabilia Dei* in the evangelization of the African continent celebrated in the Synod: the collegiality, the universal communion, where the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa is of interest to the Universal Church, because no particular or local Church is separated from the one unique group that is the universal Church.

From its first moment of convocation to its preparation and execution, this African Synod was a true Pentecost, as the work of the Holy Spirit².

1. General Theme of Evangelization

Against the danger of a partial and limited vision of the evangelization, the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, following the Council and the post conciliar pontifical magisterium, says that evangelization is a pastoral and global mission of the Church in the four fundamental dimensions: evangelization to spread and profess the faith, evangelization to celebrate faith with the sacraments, evangelization to witness to the faith in life and evangelization for a life of prayer/adoration in spirit and in truth³.

In summary, to evangelize the African continent is to make it live from Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer of mankind⁴.

The evangelization leads to the birth of the Church and is the work and vocation of the Church. This is the family of God brought together and summoned to meet in the communion of love, in unity and truth, in the Word of the Living God: Christ the Lord⁵.

An aspect that was constantly repeated by the Fathers of the Synod was that the evangelization of Africa should be based on Jesus Christ the Lord, the Gospel of God, Father of infinite love. In His condition of Son of the Living God, Jesus is the first Evangelizer: The One who came to reunite dispersed humanity, and He did it with His own life and person, His presence, His word, His works and, especially, the work of the Paschal⁶ mystery in Pentecost, where he gave us the fullness of his Spirit of infinite, holy love⁷.

In affirmation of this fundamental truth of Christ the Lord, the Good News of God and the first Evangelizer, the special session of the Synod of the Bishops for Africa, according to the living tradition of the Church, says that the evangelization of the African continent does not change the essential content (Christ the Lord), but needs to renew the method and zeal.

In this line of ideas, the Fathers of the African Synod emphasized the pastoral need of an inculturated evangelization, that will create an inculturated Church in the African continent.

Evangelization is an action of the Church, that takes place in the Church, dominated by the fundamental law of the word of the living Gospel in the community: is the continuation of the mission of the Son of God by means of His Spirit⁸.

The infinite love of God that manifested itself in Christ, continues to become manifest in the Church, the Mystery⁹ of the manifestation of God's love that creates and saves mankind.

This infinite love of God, present and operating in the Church, has its own power to transform and to renew a person, all of one's personal and social life, all of one's history.

Whereas the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of mankind, the Church in Africa has to renew the culture of the African people with the power of the Gospel itself¹⁰.

The model of Church, formed in Africa according to the Gospel, is the model of Church as family of God, mystery of the communion of love and, therefore, in intimate dialogue and on all levels inside and out.

In terms of proclamation, the evangelization of the African continent should be centered in the person of Jesus Christ, should announce Jesus Christ, *the same yesterday and today, permanent newness of the love of God for us*¹¹.

In this model of Church-Family, God and Father, Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all people rescued by him, and the Holy Spirit is the love that unites all people as brothers and sisters and as children of God.

There is no space for inactive members in the Church-Family, but all participate actively in the same evangelizing mission of the family, in its work, in its past, in its present and in its total and definitive future: therefore, in the plurality of ministries and services for the edification of the Church-Family of God in Africa¹², bishops, priests, deacons, religious men and women, but especially the faithful laity, are all called to proclaim today the mystery of the Kingdom of God in Africa¹³.

More than being the work of evangelization, essentially a work of the Church and for the Church, it is first the communal subject and object of evangelization in

Africa and, within the Church and after the Church, it is the family, the domestic Church, the first subject and object of evangelization. In the family, domestic Church, all of its members are evangelized and evangelizers in relation to one another: the spouses between each other, the parents in relation to their children and viceversa, the siblings between them, and a family in relation to other families. And as well as the family, the domestic Church, is the first model of the Church, it is also the first model of the inculturated Church in Africa.

2. The evangelization as inculturation and sanctity

For the Fathers of the special session of the Synod for Africa, the evangelizing mission of the Church in the continent needs to be inculturated, that is, seen and carried out in the frame of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God, culminated in Easter and in Pentecost. All this means that the final goal of inculturation is sanctity and, in this sanctity, the best inculturators are the saints. Truly, only by living in sanctity can one inculturate the Gospel. In Christmas, the Son of God assumed the human nature. In the Paschal Mystery, the Son of God communicates His divine life to the human nature, sanctifying it until it is exalted: *"You did not want sacrifices nor prayer; but You gave me a body... then I said: Here I come ... to do, Oh, God, Your will¹⁴".*

In the mystery of Pentecost, in the gift of His Spirit, Christ the Lord universalizes His work of unique Mediator of salvation, that is, of communion and union between humanity and divinity and also between mankind: He attracted mankind to Himself, all cultures, all the things and all the cosmos. Today, the mystery of Pentecost of Christ the Lord is effectively operating in the Church in Africa, attracting the whole continent to itself.

It is within this global frame of the Mystery of Christ, sole Mediator, on whom the Fathers of the special session of the Synod for Africa reflected on the problem of evangelization and inculturation of the inculturated Church in Africa today. Within this frame, I want to mention that I felt proud to be a Vincentian and African Bishop when the Congregation of the Mission in Egypt and Ethiopia was mentioned expressly and publicly at the Synod's opening as singular example of a Church and an evangelization inculturated in the African continent for many centuries. In fact, the only Patriarch that participated in the African session of the Synod was Patriarch Stephanus II Ghattas of Alexandria.

I will also like to mention the other three subtitles of the Synod for Africa:

1. Evangelization is a problem of Justice and peace in the African continent, plagued by an extreme poverty provoked by many circumstances, from wars to the difference in structure, from famine and illnesses to the humiliating external debt, unemployment, low rate of education, and other social problems.
2. Evangelization as dialogue within the Church with separated brothers and sisters, with believers of non-Christian religions, with traditional African religions, with people of good will, and the problem of the sects.

3. Evangelization as communication and the problem of social means of communication and African oral tradition.

There is not enough time nor space to talk about these subthemes of the African Synod. But let me remember the exciting moments of the solemn opening and closing Masses of the African Synod, they were truly African inculturated liturgies, which resumed the meaning and essential message of the Synod itself, *Synod of Resurrection, Synod of Hope*:

"Christ, our Hope, is alive, we will live15!"

[nota1] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14

[nota2] Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 1.

[nota3] *Ibid.*, 12.

[nota4] Cf. *Ad P.D.N.*, 9.

[nota5] Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 7,11.

[nota6] Cf. *Ibid.*, 8.

[nota7] Cf. *Ad P.D.N.*, 9.

[nota8] Cf. Mt 28: 18-20.

[nota9] Cf. Mt 13:11; Col 1: 9-14

[nota10] Cf. *Relatio Post disceptationem*, 4.

[nota11] *Ad P.D.N.* 19, 9.

[nota12] Cf. *Relatio Post disceptationem*, 5.

[nota13] Cf. *Instrumentum Laboris*, 13.

[nota14] Heb 10: 5-7.

[nota15] Synodus Episcoporum, Coetus Specialis pro Africa, Vat. 1994, *Ad P.D.N.*, 2.