

PETER HENRIOT

# Steps forward and back

Praise for the Church in Africa made in the apostolic exhortation published during the papal visit to Benin last month is encouraging, according to a Jesuit who has spent more than 20 years on the continent. But there are also pastoral disappointments in Pope Benedict's reflections on the Second African Synod held in Rome two years ago

**A**frica is all too often portrayed as a land of disasters, so Pope Benedict's remarks on his return from Benin last month were heartening. He observed that he had seen "a freshness in the 'yes' to life, a freshness of religious meaning and hope".

"This tells us that the continent contains reserves of life and vitality for the future, reserves upon which we can rely, upon which the Church can rely," he told a public audience.

Such a positive perspective on a continent that all too often is portrayed as a land of disasters is one reason why Benedict's document on the Second African Synod can be of interest to non-Africans, both Catholics and others around the world. *Africae Munus* ("Africa's commitment") is the apostolic exhortation that the Pope signed and published on 19 November while in Benin. Its purpose is to promote implementation of the synod's theme, "The Church in Africa in service of reconciliation, justice and peace".

As I read over this lengthy document, I recalled the emotions I felt during the three weeks in October 2009 that I sat in the last row of the Synod Hall in the Vatican. Serving as an adviser to the bishops of East Africa, I grew aware of the "joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties" of the African Church of today, realising that something important was happening that would affect not only the Church in Africa but the Church worldwide. For in so many ways of size and spirit, the Church in Africa truly is the Church of the future.

*Africae Munus* touches me in two ways. It pleases me as a document that offers pastoral directions that are challenging and encouraging. It disappoints me for its occasional minimisation of key pastoral issues raised during the synod sessions and contained in the Message and Propositions approved by the bishops at the close of the synod.

On the positive side, Pope Benedict tells us that he publishes this document "to make available the encouraging fruits proposed by

the synod". In rich, symbolic language, the Pope perceives Africa as a "spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope". He emphasises that the synod deliberations demonstrated a Christian maturity that is unafraid to face the truth of Africa's problems and address possible solutions. He sees the Church as a blessing for the continent and for the entire world.

Second, in his discussion of economic and social challenges facing Africa, the Pope does not hesitate to criticise sharply the exploitation of Africa's resources by external business interests – often cooperating with African political and economic elites – that "ensure their own prosperity at the expense of the well-being of the local population". I would suggest his analysis of this exploitation can be enriched by reading the recently released and hard-hitting document from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on reforming the international financial and monetary systems.

A third and very encouraging emphasis of *Africae Munus* is the strong link between love and justice. This, of course, is central in Pope Benedict's understanding of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). But at a time when some conservative voices would downplay the relevant political power of CST, it is good to read his strong statement that "a charity which fails to respect justice and the rights of all is false". This underpins the Pope's unequivocal call for the necessity of the Church fearlessly to speak out about economic injustices.

Fourth, the document is filled with recommendations for better formation of church members at every level in a faith that is mature and relevant. Formal education of youth is stressed as a matter of justice that the Church has promoted in the past throughout Africa and must continue to promote today. At several points it states that all members of the Church must be educated in the CST messages. And catechesis in the faith must move from memorisation to practice.

Fifth, the issue of the role of women and



**Pope Benedict XVI on his trip to Benin last month, where he presented the conclusions of the 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa. Photo: CNS**

gender equity is strongly raised in *Africae Munus*, as it was in the deliberations of the October 2009 Synod. The synod stated: "The Church has the duty to contribute to the recognition and liberation of women, following the example of Christ's own esteem for them..." While the Pope may not use quite these words, yet it is clear that he believes "without development of women, Africa will simply not develop". Yet, as I will expand later, his application of this truth to the Church is not so clear. One positive point in this document's English translation is the use of more gender-inclusive language, something not always experienced in Vatican statements.

As pleasing to me as are many parts of Pope Benedict's post-synodal document, there are also many points that I find disappointing. The first is what I feel is an occasional abstraction from African realities – a failure to contextualise the lessons being offered. Perhaps the text is simply too long and thereby loses some of its possible punch to drive home relevant teachings with specific points. For example, in the treatment of youth, generalities are repeated, with citations from other papal presentations.

Environmental concerns in Africa are noted but an extremely pressing issue such as climate change is not mentioned. The serious issue of population is treated too lightly, remarking only that "Africa maintains its *joie de vivre*, celebrating God's gift of life by welcoming children for the increase of the family circle and the human community".

From my own pastoral experience in Africa during the past two decades, I would have expected more discussion of the role of Small Christian Communities (SCCs), and both local  
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and national Justice and Peace Commissions. The SCCs are mentioned in passing in four places and Justice and Peace Commissions only once in relationship to civic education and electoral process. Yet surely these two bodies are of critical importance to the specific promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace.

Second, I could not help but contrast the strong language on public leadership in the message written by the synod bishops with the more modest mention of selfish decision-makers, both political and economic, who think only of themselves. Surprisingly, in his discussion of leaders, Pope Benedict refers to his own comments in *Caritas in Veritate* rather than to the synod's message. Certainly many of us who follow closely the political culture in our countries know the importance of clear and pointed calls by the Church to leaders who are not serving the people.

Third, the Pope states that the "most effective means for building a reconciled, just and peaceful society is a life of profound communion with God and with others", and that this is most effectively promoted in the Eucharist. "Consequently, the community celebration of Sunday, the Lord's day, and holy days of obligation is indispensable." But no mention is made of the tragic and untenable situation that every Sunday in Africa, more and more Catholics are denied participation in the Eucharist because of the paucity of

ordained priests. In its explicit discussion of priests, *Africae Munus* dwells on the necessary dedication and virtues of the priest but does not mention the growing inability of so few to serve so many.

Indeed, I would question the pastoral wisdom of encouraging African bishops to "respond generously to the request of their confrères in countries lacking vocations and assist the faithful deprived of priests". While the message of the Synod Fathers does acknowledge that some priests do go outside Africa to serve, neither it nor the propositions explicitly encourage this practice. I feel more evaluation is needed of where there is the greater need.

I have already mentioned above the positive emphasis on women's role in African society. But a fourth disappointment I have with *Africae Munus* is that it appears to ignore the strong emphasis of interventions during the October sessions and of the explicit discussion in the message and propositions about addressing issues of women's role in the African Church itself. Repeatedly during the weeks of the synod, the contribution that women were making to the mission of the Church in Africa was praised. But action was also called for to attend to the structures and attitudes that precluded fuller participation in apostolate and decision-making by women. Surely this should be addressed in the post-synodal activities.

Fifth, the discussion of HIV and Aids in *Africae Munus* is not as pastorally complete

as that offered during the synod. Proposition 51 approved by the synod bishops emphasised a holistic approach to dealing with Aids (that is, paying greater attention to the integral development and justice issues surrounding the rise of the pandemic). This critically important point is repeated, but less sharply in my opinion, in *Africae Munus*.

Moreover, this same synod proposition also urged a more pastoral approach to assist discordant couples (one spouse being infected) to reach decisions that would be responsible "for the greater good of each other, their union and their family". It is disappointing that Pope Benedict missed the chance to promote this pastoral approach to an urgent issue touching the lives of so many in Africa (and elsewhere in the world).

At the close of Pope Benedict's visit to Benin, the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar brought together church leaders, clergy and laity, to plan implementation of the directions of *Africae Munus*. My modest prayer is that this implementation pushes forward the many things about the document that please me, and works to overcome those things that disappoint me. I don't think I am alone in making this prayer.

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