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The Synod as Ecclesial Conversation

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Introduction

The Synod as Ecclesial Conversation

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Africa is not helpless. Our destiny is still in our hands. All she is asking for is the space to breathe and thrive. Africa is already moving; and the Church is moving with her, offering her the light of the Gospel.

—MESSAGE OF THE BISHOPS OF AFRICA TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD
AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE SECOND AFRICAN SYNOD, NO. 42

The movement from the first African Synod in 1994 to the second African Synod in 2009 traces the trajectory of a steadily maturing theology of the nature and mission of the church in Africa. The continuity between both synods reflects the vitality of theological reflection in Africa and its implication for the self-understanding of the community called church. While the earlier synod identified the nature of this community as family of God, the later synod assigned it a new mission, namely, to work toward reconciliation, justice, and peace. The full title of the second synod is “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: ‘You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world’ (Mt 5:13, 14).”

A distinct nature and a coherent mission form part of the essence of the church. African Christians appreciate the poignancy of the mission of the church as embodied in the synod’s theme, because this theme touches the core of Africa’s contemporary socioeconomic, cultural, religious, and political predicament. On a continent synonymous with deep crises, contradictions, and strife, “Church as Family” represents an opportunity for attaining the reconciliation, justice, and peace of God’s reign that hitherto have seemed to elude Africa. And on a continent infamous for its high levels of poverty, abuse of human rights, and disregard for human dignity, reconciliation, justice, and peace define clear imperatives of ecclesial renewal and social transformation.

A synod marks a pivotal event in the life of the church. In theological terms it represents a *kairos* for the church, an opportune moment to take

stock of its history and experience, to assess its context and challenges, and to rekindle its hopes and aspirations. As such, a synod involves a process that brings the past, present, and future realities of the church into sharper focus. More important, it is a communal event that takes the form of conversation. To speak of a synod as conversation might seem incongruent in the context of a highly stratified and hierarchical church. Yet that is the nature of a synod.

Judging by the accounts of participants and observers, the second African Synod paralleled a conversational event reminiscent of “the age-old ecclesial tradition in Africa, defended in ancient times by Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, of listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 2). According to this venerable “ecclesial tradition,” participants at the synod represent all levels of affiliation, participation, and ministry in the universal church. To quote *Gaudium et Spes*, the views that they express and the discussions that they conduct form part of a wider circle of conversation that encompasses the “joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of the people of God (no. 1). Critical to the experience and process of a synod are the virtues of dialogue and mutual listening that preclude a stifling monopoly of the conversation, the arbitrary exclusion of interlocutors, and ideological manipulation of the agenda.

It needs to be stressed that a synod serves a broader ecclesiological project: it is a way of being church that recognizes the church as a universal family with an equally global mission. During the second African Synod the dialogue partners and interlocutors of the synod were first and foremost the people of God, the church “from all countries of Africa and Madagascar and the adjacent Islands, with brother bishops and colleagues from all continents, with and under the Head of the Episcopal College, with the participation of some fraternal delegates from other Christian traditions” (*Message of the Synod*, no. 1). In this sense the event served two interrelated purposes. First, it delineated a privileged locus for raising substantial matters concerning the nature of the church and its mission. Second, it provided impetus for the conversations on the nature and mission of the church among the people of God to rise to the level of theological analysis and examination. This conversational process generated new meaning and created a fresh synthesis of theological and ethical approaches to issues that confront church and society.

On the evidence of the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the second African Synod, in addition to the virtues of dialogue and mutual listening, two prerequisites can be established for the conversational process of a synod. The first is the ability to “listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rv 2:7), and the second is to pay attention to what the Word of God is accomplishing “among us” (Jn 1:14). Perceived in such profoundly scriptural terms, a synod typifies a pentecostal and incarnational moment in the life of the church. It possesses an invaluable potential for strengthening

faith, regenerating hope, and spreading charity within and beyond the community called church.

In this age of globalization, when multiple centers of power, influence, and action intersect in the world, the synod defines for both church and society a new way of interrelating and communicating in the human community according to the approach prioritized and recommended by Vatican II, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, its document on the church in the modern world. Rather than perceive the world in antagonistic terms such as *secularism*, *relativism*, *materialism*, and *atheism*, as was repeatedly heard at the second African Synod, the church plays a role in facilitating dialogue among these competing and complementary claims, conflicts, and institutions. The measure in which the church succeeds in undertaking this role confirms its mission as a humble yet authentic servant of reconciliation, justice, and peace. This awareness undergirded the objectives of the second African Synod.

This methodology of dialogue and “listening in conversation” has been adapted to the purposes of this book. The preparatory phase included a two-day conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in March 2010. The conference served as an occasion to explore the synodal literature and to conduct intensive discussion among the contributors and other invited participants. The contributors were required to submit their papers in advance, and these papers were distributed before the conference to all the participants.

At the conference each contributor briefly summarized the central thesis of his or her paper, and then a designated respondent presented a critical response. Each paper was then subjected to an intensive discussion by all attendees. This volume contains the papers revised and edited for publication in light of the overall discussion and conclusions of the conference. Not all the papers are published in this volume, but the final list of chapters represents the fruit of active dialogue and intensive listening among theologians and friends. It exemplifies the practice of palaver that emphasizes open conversation in community and prioritizes consensus over confrontation. The conversational ethics of dialogue and listening characteristic of the second African Synod provides the foundation and inspiration for this volume.

In the understanding of the editor and contributors, the second African Synod served primarily as a catalyst; that is, it launched a process of theological conversation. Thus the articles are not intended merely to publicize the conclusions and positions of the synod. Instead, the contributors identify multiple theological and ethical issues surfaced by the synod but expand the focus of its concerns to a variety of areas, topics, and domains. The table of contents does not begin to exhaust the list of questions and problems that engaged the minds and energies of the synod participants during their three weeks in Rome. The selection of items for analysis and reflection was guided by the interest, experience, and expertise of the contributors in

light of the issues that presently shape the nature and mission of the church in Africa. They offer materials for critical reflection on the life of the church much beyond the scope envisaged or anticipated by the synod.

In this regard it is important to note that the outcome of the synod is not ossified in the ensuing official documents. Consequently, in light of the objectives expressed in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, this volume focuses on generating thought and prompting discussion aimed at shaping, guiding, and sustaining an unfolding theological narrative of the self-understanding and mission of the church in Africa. While some of the analyses and conclusions of the essays strain traditional categories, ultimately they offer fresh and innovative accounts of the church as a vehicle of reconciliation, justice, and peace on a divided, conflicted, and turbulent continent.

Pope Benedict XVI departed from synodal tradition to make public the list of final propositions of the second African Synod. Thus the pope inaugurated the post-synodal process of thought, discussion, and conversation much sooner than the publication of the post-synodal exhortation would have allowed. The situation of the church and African society gives credence to the pope's unprecedented decision. According to the *Message of the Synod*, reconciliation, justice, and peace constitute "a theme of the greatest urgency for Africa . . . a continent that is very much in dire need of these graces and virtues" (no. 1).

In his preface to *Instrumentum Laboris*, the general secretary of the Synod of Bishops, Archbishop Nikola Eterović, underlined the pressing and urgent character of the work of reconciliation on a continent "torn by many conflicts and ethnic, social and religious divisions, which oftentimes erupt into hateful and violent happenings." The mission of peace "has never been more timely in Africa, because of her conflicts, wars and violence." In the understanding of the editor and contributors to this volume, Benedict's apparent departure from tradition presents an urgent invitation to theologians and theological ethicists to examine the theme of the synod and extend its application beyond the confines of official church pronouncements.

Perhaps the most significant contribution envisaged in this book lies in the awareness that reconciliation, justice, and peace are not understood exclusively as concerns for the secular world; they impinge primarily and significantly on the nature and mission of the church. The contributors temper the strong extroverted orientation of the synod (*ad extra*) with a critical introspection and assessment of the practice of reconciliation, justice, and peace within the church (*ad intra*). As such, this collection of essays constitutes a teaching forum of African theologians, theological ethicists, and other scholars as they deliberate and discuss issues of critical concern to the church in Africa. Several features of this book call for brief additional comments.

Some contributors were also participants at the synod in various capacities as auditors, experts, or assistants. Several others served on preparatory committees, facilitated workshops, or helped to draft texts in preparation

for the synod. In addition, since the conclusion of the synod many participants have conducted research on various issues generated by the synod. In their capacity as synod participants, several contributors offer eyewitness accounts not often captured in official documentation. "The mouth does not always tell what the eyes see," says an African proverb. As is customary at such ecclesiastical assemblies, some participants were sworn to secrecy and confidentiality during and after the event. While they may not tell the whole inside story of what happened at the second African Synod, all the contributors approach the issues, questions, and problems with an acute awareness of what they mean for the church in Africa and for African society.

In keeping with the conversational methodology alluded to above, this book adopts an interdisciplinary approach. As a quick glance at the list of contributors shows, not all are theologians. They come from diverse backgrounds—political science, peace studies, social ethics, history, scripture, spirituality, philosophy, and theology. In this context this project represents a way of doing theology in a community of dialogue partners that evokes elements of traditional African palaver. Rather than a dialogue of like-minded inquirers, producing a sanitized chorus of theological formulas, this methodology creates a shared intellectual space allowing theologians to expand the horizon and frontier of their understanding of God, faith, and the community called church.

The benefit of a wider horizon and frontier makes possible theological analysis and reflection that sharpen understanding, generate new possibilities, and enable creative action capable of transforming church and society. In brief, interdisciplinarity invites and empowers theologians to break new grounds in doctrine and praxis. Whereas this approach might seem threatening to those in the church who remain conservatively committed to a monologue and offer only a univocal answer to complex theological and ethical issues, this collection of articles demonstrates the broad scope of possibilities open to those who still conceive of theological investigation as an exhilarating enterprise of faith seeking understanding.

One obvious consequence of the interdisciplinary approach of this book shows up in divergence of interpretations of the synod and the positions adopted by the individual contributors. The similarities among their positions are apparent, but so too are differences. Evaluating the progress and status of the church in Africa and assessing the continent's complicity in its predicament are tasks that defy facile and straightforward hermeneutics. These essays read Africa and the church differently. The social location, intellectual tradition, and disciplinary affiliation of each contributor reveal unique perspectives and biases. Oftentimes the contrasts are striking: where some see crises and misery, others celebrate hope and progress. This should hardly surprise any keen observer of the continent of Africa, for such is the contradictory and enigmatic nature of the continent—never sitting still long enough for researchers and scholars to cast it in a definitive

historical, economic, political, and cultural mold. And when one appears more or less set, sea changes occur revealing dents and fissures. It takes a global conversation to see the broken pieces coalesce into some clearer, albeit imperfect, image of the church in Africa at the service of reconciliation, justice, and peace, and a source and a foundation for hope, creativity, and innovation.

The Organization of the Book

The five parts of this book, each focusing on a set of issues discussed at the synod, represent the theological and ethical concerns of the contributors.

Part I focuses on the theology of the church in global terms. Teresa Okure's expert analysis of the meaning and theology of the church draws on the scriptural foundations of ecclesiology to argue a point that makes for uncomfortable reading among the hierarchy—that the primary place for practicing reconciliation, justice, and peace is within the church. Its credibility as the family of God stands or falls on its ability to exemplify and practice what it teaches and demands of society, specifically in regard to the leadership roles of women in the church-family of God.

Laurenti Magesa and Festo Mkenda approach the question of dialogue in the church from two different but complementary perspectives. Magesa unmask Christianity's historical prejudices and antagonisms toward African Religion and argues for the status of the latter as an indispensable dialogue partner if Christianity is to take root on the continent and if Africans are to become fully Christian. Mkenda draws on historical data to underscore the importance of language as a medium of interreligious dialogue. He launches a challenge to African theologians to take seriously African languages as a vehicle for theological reflection and scholarship. In either case the benefit would be immense: indigenous religious and linguistic resources offer the promise of a fresh approach to theology and Christianity in Africa and between it and the world church.

The multivalent character of the Word of God forms the basis for Paul Bére's insightful exploration of its various applications and manifestations. When correlated with the Word of God, the oral traditions of the continent of Africa offer useful pathways for understanding and practicing reconciliation in church and society. Joseph Healey's extensive exploration of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in Eastern Africa assembles a rich collection of data, anecdotes, and examples of their pastoral relevance and social effectiveness. SCCs offer the most viable models and means for the church in Africa to become real, relevant, and local in the lives of ordinary Christians.

One of the salient features of the second African Synod is the extent to which it tries to engage secular society on a wide range of political and economic issues. This approach raises the question of how to conceive of

the role or mission of the church in Africa in the public sphere. The chapters in Part II focus on this question. Elias Omondi Opongo demonstrates how injustice is a rapidly mutating reality, moving from a simple state to complex systems and networks. In this context the challenge facing the church is how to allow its approach to the problem of injustice to evolve. More than just a passive reality, the church's response needs to be an active commitment to vigilance and attentiveness to innovative means of transforming social ills in light of Christian values and principles.

Yvon Christian Elenga takes up a similar theme. The voice of the church is an essential element in society. Although the perception of the church and its relationship to other constituents of the public sphere have not always been positive, the contemporary situation offers new possibilities for engagement that focuses on social transformation. On the matter of the church's engagement with secular society and its institutions, because the synod addresses issues of continental and global concerns, it faces the temptation to remain at an abstract and theoretical level.

In their essays Anthony Egan and Odomaro Mubangizi attempt to apply the theoretical presuppositions of the synod to concrete situations. Egan uses the South African context to demonstrate how the church is not immune to historical circumstances and political development within contemporary South Africa. While the task of redefining the church's role in this context is not as simple as synodal rhetoric might suggest, the example of the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office in South Africa offers the church a viable model for engaging in political debates and shaping social policies. Mubangizi interprets the phenomenon of globalization as a new opportunity for the church as a global Christian community. Perceived in this light, the task of the church is not limited to justice, peace, and reconciliation. It also includes promoting sustainable development, healthcare, higher education for social transformation, and good governance.

The core issue in Part III is leadership in the church—both the conception of and practice of—and the factors that affect it. Anne Arabome leads the debate by describing instances of unjust repression of women's creative voices, energies, and potential for leadership. For her, the synod offers some correctives but falls significantly short. Only a radical conversion of the entire Christian community can guarantee renewal and wholeness for the church and the liberation of the entire human family. Ngozi Frances Uti makes the same point. Gender-based injustice is not a myth. Uti's examples come from her experience of the church in Nigeria, but they are not confined to this geographical location. She contends that the biblical principle of gender justice is a precondition for the church to fulfill its potential as "a powerful leaven of reconciliation" in Africa.

David Kaulem's contribution focuses strongly on issues of governance, democratic principles, and Catholic social teaching, using the contemporary political arrangement in Zimbabwe as an illustration. However, his

witty and satirical narrative of the preparatory phases and perceptions of the synod among lay Christians qualifies it as a critical analysis of how ecclesial events and processes like the synod often bypass the critical mass of Christians. Without their participation the church's avowed desire to be a credible and effective player in the public sphere remains pious rhetoric. An effective church in the public sphere is one that recognizes, forms, and validates the leadership potential of its lay members.

Ecology now constitutes a major theme in theological and ethical literature. Part IV outlines and discusses some of the theological and ethical issues relating to ecology and natural resources. As Peter Knox demonstrates, the theological resources in this area available before, during, and after the synod remain relatively scant, but the potential for a far-reaching theological and ethical reflection in this domain appears as vast as the continent's reserve of natural and ecological resources. A credible theology for our times must preserve the vital connection between the mission of the church and concern for the environment.

In the same context Peter Kanyandago addresses the thorny issue of the curse of natural resources or the paradox of plenty, that is, the fact that African countries remain economically impoverished despite being rich in natural and mineral resources. Although fuelled by historical racial prejudices, Africa's anthropological poverty in the midst of plenty is not insurmountable. In this sphere the church plays a critical role that must include advocacy informed by accurate analysis. Nathanaël Yaovi Soédé's essay is a critical analysis of the situation of poverty and its implication for the church in Africa. Facile answers and explanations do little or no good for the church and the continent. Soédé uses two biblical characters, one from the first African Synod (the victim of bandits on the road to Jericho) and the second from the second African Synod (the blind beggar, Bartimaeus), to argue that for the continent and its church to function as a healthy "spiritual lung" for the rest of humanity, both must free themselves from a culture of blaming the West, on which they depend, and assume responsibility for their own destiny.

The dominant issue addressed in Part V is HIV/AIDS. Michael Czerny traces the evolution of the subject in the second African Synod. Particularly heartening is the centrality of this pandemic to the church's self-understanding and mission of reconciliation, justice, and peace in a context where HIV/AIDS appears to have lost its urgency as a pressing social issue. One issue that continues to weigh heavily upon ethical considerations of the challenge of HIV/AIDS is the (im)morality of condom use. This debate has its value, as Paterné-Auxence Mombé makes clear in his essay. He points out that, ultimately, the debate must shift to weightier matters of justice, empowerment, and equity in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. The church's role in effecting this shift remains critical.

The causes of Africa's predicament are routinely categorized as "foreign" ideologies, viruses, and pathologies. Paulinus I. Odozor provides

evidence for making this claim. Essentially, though, Africa's destiny lies in its own hands. Odozor argues that putting the blame on foreign elements has a limited life span and that developing the continent's limitless potential is a more valuable and life-enhancing option for church and society. Corruption does not normally feature on the same list as reconciliation, justice, and peace. Gabriel Mmassi's correlation of this social scourge with the synod's theme shows how the best laid plans of the synod risk total failure unless the menace of corruption is eradicated. Only then can we talk of a reconciled, just, and peaceful church and society in Africa and elsewhere.

The synod's theme of reconciliation, justice, and peace can be construed in spiritual or political terms. Either way, a church that takes these issues seriously faces the challenge of how to balance its commitment to growth in the spiritual life with its mission of social transformation in the public sphere. Using the Zambian example, Peter J. Henriot concludes this collection of essays by identifying conditions under which the synod's outcome will not remain just pious formulas but will provide powerful incentives for transformative social and political action in Africa.

Of Women, Spiritual Lung, and Church

Notwithstanding the multidisciplinary background of contributors to this volume, the numerical preponderance of clergy-contributors reflects the constitutional imbalance of theological research and scholarship in the church in Africa and elsewhere. One lay man, three women religious, and no lay woman among twenty-one contributors is hardly representative of a reconciled, just, and peaceful church. In her chapter on the meaning of the church-family of God, Okure rightly denounces this imbalance and the underlying biases and prejudices. This situation ought to motivate theologians and religious leaders in Africa to relocate theology from ecclesiastical enclaves to the market square, or rather, to expand the locus and focus of theology to encompass the views and contributions of all Christians, especially women.

On this note the contributors call the church to the task of redefining itself, not merely as God's mouthpiece or proclaimer of reconciliation, justice, and peace (*ad extra*), but as a credible embodiment and authentic practitioner of these same virtues (*ad intra*). The old maxim *charity begins at home* is relevant here. The areas in the church that stand to benefit from the "domestic practice" of reconciliation, justice, and peace are as diverse as they are urgent. They include the mission of the laity in a clericalist and hierarchical church, the role of women in a sexist and patriarchal church, the meaning of the gospel in an ethnically divided church, the equality of all baptized Christians in a ministerially segregated church, and so forth. In this volume the women contributors unmask latent prejudices of some of

the male contributors in regard to ecclesial leadership, gender justice, and human rights. As Okure, Arabome, and Uti demonstrate, grandiloquent pronouncements and lofty principles no longer suffice; a radical conversion of hearts and minds, head and members, is imperative if the church is to become effective as the salt, light, and leaven of reconciliation, justice, and peace in the world. Their message to the church is simple, loud, and clear: practice what you preach!

Pope Benedict's potent imagery of the vital role of the African church in the world church—a spiritual lung for humanity—captured the imagination of several contributors. Flattering as this epithet might be, the implications are neither immediately apparent nor unequivocally complimentary. Odozor's and Soédé's dissections of the symbolism of "spiritual lung" reveal layers of meanings, implications, and challenges for the church and for the continent. Their shared diagnosis offers substantial material for further reflection and analysis. Both of them correct the misconception that all of Africa's socioeconomic and political woes can be blamed on foreign agents, religious ideologies, and toxic spiritual waste. The West will not serve as perpetual scapegoat and pollutant of Africa's spiritual resources, contrary to what Benedict implies in his inaugural homily. Even though the pope's statement contains certain elements of reality, nevertheless it oversimplifies the very complex historical situation of the African continent. Africa is mature enough to take hold of its destiny as church and society: "Africa is not helpless. Our destiny is still in our hands." In reaching the same conclusion as the *Message of the Synod*, the essays in this volume echo the pope's rallying cry to the church and continent of Africa at the close of the second African Synod: "Courage! Get on your feet!" This command defines the task facing the church in Africa in the twenty-first century more acutely than the pontiff's summary attribution of blame to the West for poisoning the spiritual lung of Africa.

This introductory chapter emphasizes conversation as a constitutive element of the synodal experience without claiming that it is the only valid approach. Like the synod, the kind of conversation envisaged in this volume is an ongoing process. The overall intention of this volume qualifies it as a modest contribution to an ecclesial conversation en route for the future. We may see yet another African synod.