

Politics and Good Governance A Review of the Documents of the Second Synod for Africa

The *Message to the People of God of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops* was released on October 23, 2009, along with 57 *Propositions for 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). It is the fruit of important preparatory work (*Lineamenta* and *Instrumentum Laboris*) and it was extended with the apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* that His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI promulgated in Benin on November 19, 2011. The Synod’s outcomes are being implemented, in particular, by additional propositions at operational level. Here, translation of synodal thought into pastoral strategies is what I am interested in, focussing purely on the theme of politics and good governance. To the limited focus of the article, you have to add a methodological limit: this is a review of synodal texts, but these are only the written records of an ongoing process. As I did not take part in the work of the Synod, I might fail to understand the richness of the exchanges, the ecclesiastical dynamics beyond the writings, and even the subtlety of the unspoken in the texts! If some of my comments sin by ‘Eurocentrism’, I invite my African colleagues to correct and/or complete my talk. I start from my experience as a trainer in conflict management, in particular in a dozen of African countries¹. Despite the limitations and the risks of the undertaking, I hope that my questioning and the track I suggest will promote the positive changes that the Synod Fathers want to stimulate. There will be three stages: I begin with the commitments of the laity and finish with those of the clergy, and in between I explain the operative concepts.

A practical theology primarily adapted to the purpose of the “People of God”

“This Synod of Pentecost is the Synod of empathy and commitment. Empathy with the concrete situations of our people, in the manner of the prophets. Commitment as reflected by the double Matthean metaphor of the salt and the light (cf. Mt 5:13-14)².” This second African Synod opened its session by a careful listening to Christian reality and practices. The Pope welcomed this synodal approach: all of the documents call for “transforming theology into pastoral care, namely into a very concrete pastoral ministry in which the great perspectives found in sacred Scripture and Tradition find application in the activity of bishops and priests in specific times and places” (*Africae Munus*, §10). A practical theology names the problems encountered, understands them with the help of social sciences (part I of the *Final Message*³ is called *Looking at Africa Today*), then “[considers] everything in the light of faith” (*Final Message*, §8, where part II is called *In the Light of Faith*). Finally, in the spirit of the Gospel and in the breath of the Spirit, it even suggests pastoral ways that are actually achievable by Christians for renewed action. It may certainly be difficult to avoid general principles in a synodal message, which is the result of many adjustments and compromises, and in an apostolic exhortation of particular literary genre because of its universal aim. General

¹ I was born of Belgian parents and brought up in the Great Lakes region. I spent about half of my life in Africa and the other half in Europe.

² Association des Conférences Épiscopales de la Région d’Afrique Centrale, *Pour un Plan Pastoral*, July 2011, n° 2

³ In this text, the phrase *Final Message* shortens the reference: *Message to the People of God of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops*, Rome, 2009.

principles are also prescribed in order to respect the legitimate diversity of political opinions and the freedom/responsibility of each Christian. However, “a faith that does not result in action is a sterile faith”⁴. And if the goal is to stimulate a profound Christian conversion of hearts, minds, attitudes, ecclesial and socio-political structures⁵, then how do we translate the general principles into programmes of real action that will transform reality? The success criterion of a speech pressing for action does not reside in the turn of the speech but in the effectiveness of the action!

“Africa needs saints in high political office: saintly politicians who will clean the continent of corruption, work for the good of the people, and know how to galvanize other men and women of good will from outside the Church to join hands against the common evils that beset our nations” (*Final Message*, § 23). As the building of a just social order (*Africae Munus*, §22) starts with the basis, we also need holy local and regional leaders. And above all, we need human networks, including at diocesan level, because a dictatorship can easily eliminate a person who stands up alone to the regime, while it cannot demolish a strong network. Fully mobilized, the ecclesial network is a very important force among the living forces of many sub-Saharan countries. As an African proverb states, “an army of ants is able to control an elephant”, - but the elephant can just as easily crush some ants! Therefore, the strategy to topple an injustice is crucial, as well as collective mobilization, which involves organizing committed groups. The difficulty is thus to provide beacons stimulating this structure.

“This Synod turns, with deep affection,” (*Final Message*, §22) to “dear African Catholics in public life [...] (with) courage” (*Final Message*, §23). In addition to condemning politicians in high office⁶ and **proclaiming** Christ, it is possible to **offer** them a pastoral policy that is cohesive all of good will. Who can provide this pastoral policy? Lay people are able to, but are they allowed to? Let me explain: the Magisterium claims to be asked not to be directly political and calls the laity “fully-fledged messengers of the Gospel” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, §137), “full members of the *res publica*, and enable them to play their part in building it up” (*Africae Munus*, §76). “You are the Church of God out in the market places of society. It is in and through you that the life and witness of the Church are made visible to the world. You therefore share in the mandate of the Church to be ‘ambassadors for Christ’ working for reconciliation of people to God and among themselves” (*Final Message*, §22). Then, who has the power to mobilize the Church? The institutional Church counts on the laity, to whom she mandates this power, as they have the ability and the skill to act. But they need concrete support from the Church leaders who have the authority to give permission. A real mobilization of forces requires cooperation between the two types of power: *yes, we can* and *yes, you may*.

The Synod salutes the remarkable work done by the Justice and Peace Commissions, for example in pre-election civic education⁷. Many are carrying out actions that are both measured

⁴ Speech of Msg. Nicolas Djomo, President of the Episcopal Conference of DRC, during a workshop of the Synod, quoted by Axelle Fischer, Secretary General of the Justice and Peace Commission in Belgium, at the study day on *The Church and the Future of Africa around the Second African Synod*, Catholic University of Louvain, June 8, 2012.

⁵ Association of Episcopal Conferences of the Central African region, *Pour un Plan Pastoral*, n° 5.

⁶ The Synod clearly condemns the politicians that are greedy “for power and wealth” (*Final Message*, n° 36). As to “the many Catholics in high office who have fallen woefully short in their performance in office”, it “calls on such people to repent, or quit the public arena” (*Final Message*, n° 23). It also condemns unjust structures of the world order (*Final Message*, n° 32 & 33) ending with a cry from the heart: “Is there no one out there able and willing to stop all these crimes against humanity?”

⁷ “At all levels of planning in the Particular Churches in Africa, justice and peace commissions have sought to stir and form the consciences of the faithful so that they might become the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

and courageous in dangerous social contexts. That said, aren't some of them suffering from being a traditional top-down diocesan organ? How can we better relay and amplify the commitments of political justice and social peace from the grassroots of the communities and from the most active Catholic movements? Learning participative management can help renew awareness of the clutch pedal between the engine and the wheels. It is also necessary to analyse the difficulty of how to get civil society actors working in the field involved in producing well thought-out strategies. Another challenge is to maximize the support and collaboration of the Justice and Peace Commissions of the North and the international NGOs.

Building a qualified and enlightened Christian laity begins with the creation of training institutes and universities (*Final Message*, §22) and the establishment of faculties of political science in Catholic universities (*Propositio* §25). Certainly! But it seems to me that other suitable suggestions could have been submitted. First, in a realistic and constructive spirit, to mark out the way ahead, it would be useful to recognise, in Africa more than anywhere else, the great dependence of the laity on the clergy. Indeed, the funds coming from the North for training, logistics, networking and other purposes first go through the clergy. Yet, beautiful dynamics are born where the bishop instils, between clergy and laity, a spirit of sharing of responsibilities and an inclusive power to take decisions. A practical path is to give the responsibility to a troika which includes, for example, a diocesan priest, a member of a religious order and a layperson. In Kinshasa, Christians are active in the defence of human and civil rights, the fight against impunity and the shameful treatment of prisoners and the proper functioning of justice, etc. There, the Justice and Peace Commission has had no appointed official for years, as traditionally the judicial vicar is at its head. Assigning key positions to lay people, who are by status more independent than clerics, will create challenges. But aren't these difficulties a source of life and salvation? I think the Synod's operational propositions are clearer for the clergy than for the laity. Upstream of pastoral paths, the doctrinal level itself appears to suit a clergy invited not to be directly involved in politics better than a laity clearly called to commit themselves to the City and to contribute to good governance. The Post-synodal Exhortation is pleased that the Synod has "made it possible also to reflect on the Church's public role and her place in Africa today" (*Africae Munus*, §17). Here, the Pope is thinking mainly about the ecclesial institution. The pyramidal order, from the bishops to the laity, in chapter 1 of *Africae Munus* about the Church members, raises a matter of ecclesiology well beyond precedence. At a time when Catholics and Protestants enjoy mutually enriching relations, we have things to learn from our brothers of the Reformation who think the service of the common good from the fundamental commitment of the vast majority of God's people. They have developed fruitful practices of assembly and co-responsibility which could be combined with the Catholic treasure of unity⁸.

In this manner, the faithful are formed to respect the rights of citizens and to fight against impunity of actions, war crimes, crimes against humanity, the undignified treatment of prisoners, etc. At election time, some justice and peace commissions have proposed programmes of civic and electoral instruction. Some shortfalls in society as well as those in the Church have been remedied due to their intervention. " (*Instrumentum Laboris*, n° 123). "... Contribute through Justice and Peace Commissions to monitoring elections, so that they be free, fair, transparent and secure for us " (*Propositio* n° 26).

⁸Cf. the positive and stimulating experiences of the Catholics who work hand in hand with Protestants, for instance in the practical operation of the World Council of Churches which also includes women pastors and bishops. At their level, the Synod Fathers approve " the greater integration of women into Church structures and decision-making processes " (*Propositio* n° 47). This Synod *Propositio* is supported by the *Final Message* n° 25 and *Propositio* n° 4 pushing for the creation of " Continental Council for Catholic Women ", but it does not appear at all in *Africae Munus*, as n° 55 to n° 59 dedicated to women closes this way : " God has made you channels of life. The Church will always support you. (...) The Church counts on you to create a "human ecology" through your sympathetic love, your friendly and thoughtful demeanour, and finally through mercy, values that you know

Human sciences on participatory management are also valuable: they teach how a group of people can optimize its results through real involvement of the different actors that make up the group. This necessarily involves several mechanisms for sharing the power of discernment and decision; this begins with the way the group sets up its operating framework and its procedural rules, even its meeting place.

A spiritual theology of peace better fitted to a non-violent struggle against injustice

The Second Synod for Africa puts forward the commitment for reconciliation, to the point that “the African concept of justice is the same as reconciliation and peace” (*Instrumentum Laboris*, §55). The justice of the Kingdom mentioned in *Instrumentum Laboris* §44 is not referred to in the *Final Message* that highlights the notion of “the justice of repentance and reparation” (§8) within the reconciliation process. Conflict resolution appears in the *Peace* section, always in order to secure peace (*Propositio* §21), never as a means to strengthen justice and prepare the way for the rule of law. Understood as a moral and spiritual value, justice is embedded in a process of reconciliation, as suggested by its place in the middle of the trilogy “reconciliation, justice and peace”.

This spiritual approach focuses very little on the search for justice as a socio-political process, as a political struggle through negotiation in the conflict. However, neither moral exhortations, nor “the promotion of a culture concerned with the rule of law and the respect for universal human rights and formation” (*Propositio* §25) are enough when the political elite help themselves instead of the common good, and when they impose the law of the strongest instead of consolidating the strength of the law. These good proposals of the Synod deserve to be complemented by the recognition and support of concrete and committed actions. In this way, counter-powers, of an order different to the abusive powers, can work together effectively. At least, in order to address this challenge, Christian political thought needs to allow more room for the struggle against injustice and for the conflictual aspect that is intrinsic to political life. This fight for justice requires communication, strategy and negotiation skills, so that we actually carry weight in the balance of political powers, and not fall into the spiral of violence in the escalation of power games.

To what extent does the pastorally aimed Synod have to enter these socio-political considerations? The Pope points out the challenge: “The task we have to set for ourselves is not an easy one, situated as it is somewhere between immediate engagement in politics – which lies outside the Church’s direct competence – and the potential for withdrawal or evasion present in a theological and spiritual speculation which could serve as an escape from concrete historical responsibility” (*Africae Munus*, §17). Indeed, a discourse that does not sufficiently take into account the reality of the conflict risks lapsing into an insubstantial idealism. A discourse that lays stress only on peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, prayer and hope, might be forgotten or considered comforting, or even an illusion. Realistic Christian political thought has to take into account the political mechanism as it is, with the power relationships and schemes that are inherent to political life. By way of analogy, some engineers, while developing the internal combustion engine, may be tempted to put the petrol in a corner of the garage, as it is dangerously explosive and volatile. Yet, a car without petrol does not move. The challenge is to develop an explosion in the combustion chamber, so that the energy is communicated to the

how to instil in your children, values that the world so badly needs. In this way, by the wealth of your specifically feminine gifts, you will foster the reconciliation of individuals and communities. “

wheels. Likewise, in socio-politics, one cannot both improve justice or the rule of law and fail to touch the essence of politics, i.e. the fight in the dangerous – but not always violent or anti-evangelical – struggle.

The Synod makes concrete and wise proposals in terms of training. The importance of working on the culture of justice and peace is underlined in *Propositio* §15, 21, 24, 25, 38, 49 and 56: “Promoting justice for everyone and respect for human rights through civic education and by building up a culture of justice and peace” (*Propositio* §15)⁹. This thorough work is indeed a fundamental investment. But is it enough to meet the needs of Christians who are already committed alongside people of goodwill to concrete action? Formation for conflict resolution occupies a key place in the synodal *Propositio* §21, but greater use could be made of the fruits of principles and methods of conflict resolution in the rest of the synodal texts. An avenue of research could be to show concretely the evolution of how the struggle for justice and the conflictual dimension of the political commitment have been taken into account in the texts, from the *Lineamenta* to the *Post-synodal Exhortation of the Pope*, not forgetting the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the *Final Message of the Synod* and its *Propositions*. Take, for example, the analysis of what official documents remember from the most engaged and engaging synodal speeches, such as that of Obiora Francis Ike, the Nigerian founder of the Catholic Institute for Development Justice and Peace (CIDJAP). It is also important to observe the discrepancies between the synodal Fathers' oral interventions and the subsequent written documents, on various concepts such as the: “fight against impunity”¹⁰, “preventive role of the law”¹¹, “injustice as structural violence” rewritten as “structure of sin” by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §36 and 37, in 1987. Another avenue of research is to analyse when and in what sense the concepts ‘peaceful’ and ‘non-violent’ are used. The first term is the favourite, the second is used only in the *Lineamenta* (§64 and §76), not in the other written documents. How is it used in the talks? Is it systematically linked to Gospel non-violence? And is Gospel non-violence understood only in moral and spiritual sense of unconditional respect for humans and life? Such an understanding does not include the principles and methods of non-violence. It is called strategic or active to underline the pitfall of passivity which is a party to violence¹². The non-violent strategy faces the challenge of

⁹ “...small groups and programmes of formation be developed which are suitable for each level (primary, secondary, college and university) to impart a real culture of peace “ (*Propositio* n° 21). “... To fully exercise her role and contribute to a culture of peace and human rights, the Church in Africa ...” (*Propositio* n° 24). In such circumstances, the Church’s mission is to promote a culture of respect for the rule of law and the rights of all “ (*Propositio* n° 25). “ Family has a divine origin. It is the “sanctuary of life” and the nucleus of society and the Church. It is the proper place for learning and practising the culture of pardon, peace, reconciliation and harmony “ (*Propositio* n° 38). “ May the children receive psychological help, a culture of justice and peace “ (*Propositio* n° 49). “ ...Ethical formation of journalists to promote a culture of dialogue which avoids division, sensationalism, disinformation “ (*Propositio* n° 56).

¹⁰ In all synodal texts, the “ fight against impunity “ appears only once, in *Instrumentum Laboris* n° 123, and hardly features in *Propositio* n° 2: “ the Synod also noted the sad fact that in many countries in Africa, there are rampant violations of human rights, injustices, corruption and impunity... “. (Cf. also *Instrumentum Laboris*, n° 56, 57). How can we explain the gap between this silence and the strategical importance of the political struggle put forward many times in the Synod debates?

¹¹ *Propositio* n° 23 deserves to be highlighted: it encourages the promulgation of “**binding** universal standards for the global commerce of conventional weapons, which would respect human rights and humanitarian international law “. Moreover, in *Propositio* n° 29, the Church commits herself concretely “ to establish a desk in various countries of the continent to monitor the management of natural resources “.

¹² Seeking to avoid any confusion with pacifism, non-violent activists are wary of the ambiguous term “peaceful”. But the latter is used in all Synodal texts (which avoid the term “non-violence”!). For instance, “manage conflicts peacefully” (*Lineamenta* n° 68) ; the priests “ witness to living together in peace “ (*Final Message* n° 20, read again in *Africae Munus* n° 108) ; “ preparing for tomorrow a healthy, peaceful and responsible society “ (*Instrumentum Laboris* n° 133) ; “ holiness is the most effective way of building up a society

balancing “force, law and value”, as the Jesuit Gaston Fessard¹³ puts it in his trilogy: not only the respect for people and the witnessing of Gospel values but also the socio-political struggle to actually break the injustices and build up the Legal state (in French : un Etat de droit).

Africae Munus uses the witnessing vocabulary 36 times¹⁴ and by doing so displays a theology strong on the spiritual level but ignores the thoughtful and organized fight against injustice, essential for good democratic governance. Do the silences in the synodal texts about principles and methods of non-violent conflict resolution mean disapproval? Or will the inspiring *Propositio* §21, that stresses the need to invest in concrete ways of conflict resolution, be enough to produce fertile post-synodal applications? Take, for example, Christians' non-violent march for the truth of the polls in the DRC on February 16, 2012. “What can we do to deal with elections that are not consistent with law?” wonders Abbé Leonard Santedi, Secretary General of the National Episcopal Conference of Congo. He extended his remarks¹⁵ by talking about the sovereignty that the Poland people had been able to keep, thanks to the strength of their culture. This culture materialized into a structured opposition movement that led non-violent actions, collectively organized, with determination, intelligence and method. With the very tangible commitment of the Church, including the Pope John Paul II, the Polish people were able to free themselves from the Russian oppressor through civil disobedience. In January 2012, the Episcopal Conference of the DRC explicitly condemned the election results, but remained very cautious by not giving an ‘ecclesial label’ to the march of 16 February 2012. Doesn't the synodal dynamic have to give in the Church some marks and criteria in order to identify the concrete forms of actions that truly make the principles operational? At least, in order to fully take their place as citizens, lay people need to be informed by Christian political scientists and by theologians who deepen the practical implications of doctrine. It is also significant to share experiences of positive initiatives in conflict management, such as the instructive experiences of Sant'Egidio, of the Church of Mozambique supported by the dynamism of the AMECEA in Eastern Africa¹⁶. They show the importance of organizing a dialogue that is on the one hand realistic in the balance of powers analysis, and on the other hand idealistic in the deep respect for the protagonists. Such a process requires a clear choice of non-violence. Non-violence cannot be reduced to its peaceful sweetener because a human right is never granted on a silver platter. It has to be earned through a long and courageous networking task, on the basis of strong skills and a good knowledge of the legislation in the country.

I talked with five Synod participants. None could answer the following questions of mine: Regarding the drafting of the paragraphs of magisterial documents on politics and good governance, which socio-political experts did the Synod consult? There were lay members committed to *Justice and Peace Commissions* there and Jacques Diouf (FAO)'s address in the

of reconciliation, justice and peace “ (*Propositio*° 45) ; “ The most effective means for building a reconciled, just and peaceful society is a life of profound communion with God and with others “ (*Africae Munus* n° 152). Regarding the choice of the Magisterium to use “ peaceful “ rather than “ non-violent “, beyond the Synod for Africa, cf. my current doctoral thesis at the Catholic University of Louvain on the links between Gospel non-violence and traditional doctrine formerly known as “ just war “ and now “ just peace “. See the statement of the German bishops on *A Just Peace*, September 27, 2000. Document available on <http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/veroeffentlichungen/deutsche-bischoefe/db66fr.pdf> accessed on 21/6/12.

¹³Cf. his book *Autorité et bien commun*, Paris, Aubier, 1944.

¹⁴ The word “ witness/es “ is used 30 times, “ testimony/ies “ 3 times and “ testify/ies “ 3 times.

¹⁵ Presentation at the Catholic University of Louvain seminar on June 8, 2012, about *The Church and the Future of Africa around the Second African Synod*.

¹⁶Cf. <http://www.amecea.org/index.php/departments/pastoral-justice-and-peace>, in particular the training in Conflict Management and Peace Building of the AMECEA Pastoral Institute.

plenary session caused a debate over food security and sovereignty. But how did the Synod capitalise on the skills of the lay people involved in formation (the ability of socio-political analyses that are sharp and relevant in their principles) and in political action (skill to organize collective actions methodically)? Does the lack of activist experience involved in non-violence imply a deficit in political culture or a deliberate choice?

Undoubtedly, the Synod documents do not need to be political scientists' treatises, nor their ministry open to criticism. Here is an example of tension between the two registers. In the *Post-synodal Exhortation 'Africae Munus'*, there are about 25 instances of the word 'pray' and its derivatives¹⁷ and about 20 mentions of 'hope' and its derivatives¹⁸. While the *Final Message* talks about prayer only in Nos. 2, 8 and 22, and barely at all about hope (Nos. 6, 15, 23, 35, and in Nos. 22 inside a quote from the First Epistle of Peter). However, when it comes to an oppressor's power, non-compliance with the law, or the impunity of the strongest, we cannot simply 'hope' that people obey the law. The right tool against impunity and corruption is an effectively binding legal framework. In the political field, prayer and hope cannot replace the skill needed for the Rule of law; they strengthen it spiritually. To avoid confusion, the challenge of political thought is to discriminate clearly between the registers (ethics, spirituality, political negotiation and framework of law) and then to reorganize them. For a politician and a political analyst, the calls for prayer and hope ring true only if they are well enough organized and linked to the implementation of practical resources and the technical tools needed.

Another idea to consider is deepening the concept of power in order to enhance the traditional approach of authority as service (*Instrumentum Laboris*, §23; *Final Message*, §23; *Propositio* §16; *Africae Munus*, §81), for the spirituality of service deserves to be actualised in expertise. Concretely, this can mean incorporating the achievements of human sciences which are defining ever more clearly the line between illegitimate authority **over** the other (fueling domination and violence) and legitimate authority **for** ensuring a binding framework of law and **for** reaching agreements through negotiation in case of conflict of interests, while preserving the authority to be **with**, by means of psychology skills and faith resources. To stimulate the Church dialogue with the outside world, I think it is important to make links between these three forms of power (power **for** the law, power **for** political agreement, relational power **with**) and the synodal trilogy 'justice, reconciliation and peace', as well as, more broadly, between the secularized concepts used in conflict management and those used in theological thought. A pastoral care contextualized the power of the patriarchy in Africa also seems to me appropriate.

¹⁷In n° 3, 13, 45, 48, 50, 54, 63, 89, 96, 100, 101, 103, 106, 108, 109, 119, 121, 124, 127, 129, 133, 174, 175.

¹⁸In n° 2, 3, 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 30, 32, 63, 65, 137, 158, 172, 175.

It seems that the Synod tends to rename the “Justice and Peace” Commissions and their actions into “Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”. This took its motivation from the *Instrumentum Laboris* : “Some responses to the *Lineamenta* consider that *justice and peace* commissions would greater and more effectively fulfil their mission, if their mission were better understood. It is felt that these commissions are often seen as instruments to encourage the laity to fight for justice and not as a true tool of evangelization working for reconciliation, justice and peace. How can *justice and peace* commissions be better understood?” (§125) As soon as it was summoned, the Pope asked that the Synod be centred on ‘reconciliation’, a term still to be defined. Peace has been described as a moral value that has to be promoted first of all by a conversion of heart and a social approach of reconciliation. This theology is faithful to the tradition that favours the inner transformation of man. *Africae Munus* shows it clearly: “Human justice which is not the fruit of reconciliation in the ‘truth of love’ (Eph 4:15) remains incomplete; it is not authentic justice. Love of truth – ‘the whole truth’, to which the Spirit alone can lead us (cf. Jn 16:13) – is what marks out the path that all human justice must follow if it is to succeed in restoring the bonds of fraternity within the ‘human family, a community of peace’, reconciled with God through Christ. Justice is never disembodied. It needs to be anchored in consistent human decisions. A charity which fails to respect justice and the rights of all is false. I therefore encourage Christians to become exemplary in the area of justice and charity (Mt 5:19-20)” (*Africae Munus*, §18).

Certainly, in a spiritual perspective that knows and probes into hearts, minds and souls, “Reconciliation is a **pre**-political concept and a pre-political reality, and for this very reason it is of the greatest importance for the task of politics itself” (*Africae Munus*, §19). However, the Pope himself acknowledges that in the political context, reconciliation occurs “**In the wake** of a conflict, [...] **after** long periods of war” (*Africae Munus*, §21). Indeed, in a socio-political perspective, reconciliation is a concept used mainly in the context of post- conflict interventions. And the Synod socio-political analyses are mainly based on society rebuilding contexts, experiences and concepts, when it comes to the sensitive issue of holding together the dual approach of love and truth, with tensions between forgiveness and justice. Investing in restorative justice pays, in comparison with the limits of a criminal justice system manipulated by a revengeful spirit. “True pardon promotes the justice of repentance and reparation” (*Final Message*, §8). Therefore, the *Post-synodal Exhortation* seeks a spiritual refocusing in a socio-political background of post-conflict reconciliation. However, this option restricts the political battlefield and the pastoral scope for intervention. For it is precisely **before** the conflict escalates into an armed confrontation that non-violence can best thwart violence through its wide range of possible actions. Men's sin lies mainly in their passivity **before** the armed conflict, in their lack of will, courage and intelligence to mobilize the existing resources upstream from the hostilities. Thus, in most African countries that are not directly at war but actually involved in never ending conflicts due to lawlessness, this preventive perspective shifts the use of forces in the art of true peace: not adjusting the past, but rather organizing targeted actions in the present, with realistic aims that achieve in stages a more pacified future. The fire-fighter must have his proper place, and it is not in the centre. Most of the work to counter fire consists in prevention and is done by engineers who remove flammable materials in building. Even the fire-fighter knows very well that, in front of a lasting smouldering fire, he cannot simply target the small flames that appear here and there, but he has to work with courage in order to reach the seat of the fire. It is the same at social and political levels, and political theology has to take this into account. Simply put, with the risks of simplification, does the majority of the laity have to think and act like a Mother Teresa who does not interfere with politics but heals the wounded with love, or like a Helder Camara whose reaction to criticism remains famous: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist” ?

From a Church Institution that is not openly involved in politics to a clergy more openly in solidarity with committed and committing actions

The clergy's involvement in the public sphere and their solidarity with the laypeople that are committed in concretely prophetic action is a sensitive issue. In many African countries, the Church is an important political actor: she is at one and the same time a social, educational and health structure, a development fund manager, etc. It is reasonable for her to make the best use of all her power to influence for her values and societal projects in accordance with the Gospel. It is also reasonable that she, for instance, asks to "be present in the national, regional and continental institutions in Africa (AU). The Synod urges Episcopal Conferences to support the NEPAD - Peer Review Mechanism within the African Union" (*Propositio* §24). Moreover, the clergy play a key role in the *res publica* in Africa since only the priests receive extensive training. This is how it was in the early generations of Catholics and it remains true in most African dioceses. And as many young people with great potential have taken orders, this is where the best lifeblood committed to Church is. Among them there are men and women who are charismatic leaders. In this sense, the full title of the *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation* that specifies the order of priority of its addressees *Africae Munus of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* is not only in accordance with everyone's level of institutional commitment, but also strategically realistic!

However, the Church asks the ordained ministers to have no direct involvement in politics. But the limits are very vague and ambiguous. How does the Magisterium define in its texts the religious sphere in which the clergy is confined? How do the clergy evade the passivity that is contrary to "the building of a just social order" (*Africae Munus*, §22) that the Synod calls for? What benchmarks and criteria are given to the pastors so that their impartiality and universal solicitude be not a complicity of the status quo that benefits the oppressors? On what grounds - not written in the texts - are priests regularly banned from taking part in concrete actions in the field? Wouldn't it be fair for a diocesan priest, before being restricted in this respect, if there were a more open procedure than his bishop's discretionary judgment? Furthermore, isn't there more to explain in words of today's culture as to how the official position of the Magisterium, that openly claims not to be directly involved in politics, is consistent with its prophetic doctrine that calls for committed and committing actions? And how does the African episcopate explain the discrepancy between the principle displayed and the actual strategies of influence?

A Congolese cleric recently told me: "The beautiful messages of the bishops, however powerful, do not worry the politicians, who have got used to the fact that strong words have little impact on these Christians and do not lead to effective popular mobilization. The strategy needs to be changed now!" The ambiguity of the formula 'the Church does not do politics' is useful to bishops when they need room to manoeuvre. How is it possible to allow them to use this strategic advantage towards the political class, while reducing the misuse of this snappy slogan within the ecclesial institution? The dialogue between African and European episcopates is certainly valuable in that respect. In the West, the evolution of the secularized society and the place of the Church within it led the bishops to sharpen their vision, thought and action regarding 'the prophetic mission of the Church'¹⁹. A theology enlightening the

¹⁹ In his presentation of the "Review of the Synod of Bishops for Africa" on November 1, 2009, Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, Archbishop of Paris, uses 16 times (in 6 pages) the word "prophetic" to describe the Church, its mission and its witness. Cf. <http://www.notredamedeparis.fr/spip.php?article903> consulted in French on 2/6/12.

intervention of the clergy in the social and political field will have to rethink the traditional distinction between the sacred and the profane in the context of today's incarnation. Moreover, praxeological and management sciences provide interesting insights that current theological researches are integrating. There is - in my view - material for thinking anew the relationship between the Augustinian categories of 'earthly city' and 'heavenly city' as well as the 'spiritual' and 'temporal' duties both handled by the bishop "as *head* of his local Church" (*Final Message*, §19)²⁰.

"Our dioceses must be models of good governance, transparency and good financial management" (*Final Message*, §19). Even before serving society, the Synod highlights the importance that the Church sets an example, decreasing the divergence between the values put forward and its internal workings. In my experience, it starts by overcoming the difficulty of accepting the Church's inner conflict as a fruitful source for transformation. As a trainer in conflict management formation, especially for the clergy in various African regions, I can testify to the success of investing in concrete tools for better communication. Managing our small daily conflicts can be learned. Those are unavoidable; they are calls for greater truth and a more authentic relationship. The challenge is to stop feeling guilty because of the others and to assume personal responsibility through a personal and communal journey. Then, we become able to channel the debate in a non-violent way, instead of doing everything to avoid it, for fear of inappropriate outbursts.

Many more recent popes understood this: actions mean much more to the world than words. In fact, the word speaks much better when accompanied by action. At the risk of saying less about what would be theoretically or ideally good to do, the aim then is to say what we have already done and what we are going to do, as the Good News is alive no less along the path of brotherhood than at the end of it. "We are going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end," said Gregory of Nyssa, in the joy of walking together, following the One who put us on the road, who makes us live, and who unites us as brothers and sisters.

Etienne Chomé, trainer in conflict resolution,
professor at Lumen Vitae (Brussels) and
researcher at the Catholic University of Louvain
chome@communications.org June 2012

²⁰*Africae Munus* renews this idea of a "bishop ruler" in n° 101.