

**A REFLECTION ON THE CHALLENGES, ACHIEVEMENTS
AND POINTS OF CONCERN
ABOUT THE CHURCH IN AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR**

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Africa is a complex that can not be easily defined. It's a continent of paradoxes. It has the best runners and tourist attractions but to has the world's highest life risks to the human person. Our continent and the Church within her has known unavoidable suffering, injustice, oppression, repression, exploitation, tension, slave trade, famine, dictatorship, disease, illiteracy... Africa is the continent of a people without an agenda. But Africa has also known traditional values such as solidarity with the suffering and sharing the most limited resources available. In the recent past, Africa has been termed the spiritual lung of the world.

Our reflection is held against the background of a rather peculiar challenging and deplorably situation of a continent that is so rich is opportunities and resources but at the same time so poor and at times miserable. In fact the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa is facing the questions of:

- Credible and deeper evangelization
- Inculturation Christian values
- Justice and Peace
- Dialogue
- Communication
- Witness
- Reconciliation

There is the heroism and the pioneering spirit of the missionaries and other committed apostolic agents, structures of evangelization are more visible than a century ago, the African saints appear on the Church calendar; but there also there is the lack of commitment and pastoral zeal of, baptised faithful, some church personnel, the emergence of syncretistic tendencies, proliferation of sects, the politicization of Islam and its intolerance to criticise.

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They are emerging democracies and the awakening of a profound cultural, social, economic and political consciousness on the continent, but they also there is bad governance, widespread corruption and an alarming increase of poverty to reflect over.

The Exceptional Growth of the Church in Africa

In the past few decades, it has become customary to talk about an exceptional growth of the Church in Africa; and the indicators are many. However, what is really new among these signs of growth of the Church on the continent and its Islands are:

- The numerical growth of those receiving baptism
- The awareness with in the Christian Communities that they are the Church
- The ascendancy of African members of missionary congregations to leadership positions and roles: council members, vicars general, and even superiors general.
- Pursuit of self-reliance on the part of local churches, as they engage in economic and income-generating ventures (banks, credit unions, insurance companies, real estate and shops).
- An observable growth in ecclesiastical structures and institutions (seminaries, Catholic universities and institutes of higher learning, on-going formation centres for the religious, catechists and the laity, schools of evangelization), as well as growth in experts and resource persons for research work in the areas of faith, mission, culture and inculturation, history, evangelization and catechesis.

During the same period, we also have a **significant increase in the number of vocations** to the priesthood and the consecrated life. In fact a consistent increase is witnessed in all sectors, particularly among Christ’s faithful: bishops, priests, deacons, men and women in the consecrated life and committed lay people, among whom catechists occupy an important place. This is proven in a comparison of statistical data from 1994 with that of 2007.

	1994	2007	+ %
Ecclesiastical territories	444	516	+ 16,21
Bishops	513	657	+ 28,07
Priests	23.263	34.658	+ 49,09
Diocesan	12.937	23.154	+ 78,97
Religious	10.326	11.504	+ 11,40
Permanent Deacons	326	403	+ 23,61
Non-Clerical Religious	6.448	7.921	+ 22,84
Consecrated Religious	46.664	61.886	+ 32,62
Members - Secular Institutes	390	578	+ 48,20
Lay Missionaries	1.847	3.590	+ 94,36
Catechists	299.994	399.932	+ 33,31
Seminarians	17.125	24.729	+ 44,40

We also need to mention those in pastoral activity who have sealed their ecclesial service with the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. From 1994 to 2008, 521 pastoral workers have given their lives in Africa.

Hot Points for the Church in Africa

Nonetheless, the Church in Africa also faces formidable challenges:

- The talk about a thriving Church in Africa conceals the fact that the Church hardly exists in **large parts north** of the equator. The exceptionally growing Church in Africa is to be found generally **south** of the Sahara.
- The fidelity and commitment of some clergy and religious to their vocations.
- The need to evangelize (or evangelize anew) for a conversion that is deep and permanent.
- The loss of members to new religious movements and sects. Catholic youth travel outside (to Europe and America), and return non-Catholic, because they felt less at home in the Catholic Churches there.
- Lack of a specific pastoral plan for women and youth
- Incapacity to evangelize political leaders and business people
- Unconstructive criticism on the Church from her members/theologians
- Falling population growth indices in traditionally Christian Europe and America.

Social facts that have influenced the Church in Africa

Slavery and enslavement, which the Arab world initiated on the East African coast, and Europeans, with the collaboration of Africans themselves, took over into the 14th century and extended over the continent, represented forced movement of Africans. These days, the **voluntary migration of Africa's sons and daughters to Europe, America and the Far East** for various reasons, land them in servile conditions, which require our attention and pastoral care.

Political facts that have influenced the Church in Africa

Closely related with post-colonial developments on the continent has been the celebrations of independence and the emergence of African states and nations with governance exercised manifestly by Africans. The character of the exercise of political power and governance has been generally criticized and flawed on several counts by **tyranny, dictatorship, politicization of religion and ethnicity, disregard for rights of citizens, lack of transparency** and press freedom.

Bad governance and economic facts detrimental on Africa

The radical relationship between governance and economy is clear; and it demonstrates that **bad governance begets bad economy**. This explains the paradox of the poverty of a continent which is certainly the most richly endowed in the world. The spin-off of this "governance-economy equation" is that there is **hardly any African country that can meet its budgetary obligations**, namely, its planned national financial programme, without outside assistance in the form of grants or loans. This continual underwriting of national budgets by means of loans inflates a bludgeoning debt burden

It is has to be emphasized that, "Only motivation and efforts coming from within Africa will lead to success. In a sense, Africa's emergence from its economic throes should be the work of Africans and be spearheaded by them. Thus **hearts must be converted and eyes healed to appreciate new ways of**

administering public wealth for the common good; and this is the remit of the evangelizing mission of the Church on the continent and the islands.

SOCIAL Question Marks

The fall-out from historical, political, economic situations determine how healthy stable, peaceful, prosperous the African society is which will reflect the authenticity and credibility of the Church.

Intensive violent conflicts

Armed conflicts continue to threaten people in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Uganda (where 30,000 have been abducted and are used as baby wives and children soldiers by Lord Resistance Army). Of late we have experienced post election violence in Kenya and in our neighbouring countries: xenophobic attacks in South Africa and instability in Zimbabwe.

HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis and malaria

The pandemic and diseases continues to ravage our populations while in many instances protracted cure has slipped from a prominent place of concern and response on the agenda of governments, civil society and even the churches.

Quantity and quality dilemma

Membership in our Church continues to increase in numbers each year but this has not always been accompanied by deepened faith and spirituality with solid inculturation efforts.

Growth of strong institutions

Continental, regional and national bodies have matured, such as Dar Comboni university of Islamic Studies in Cairo, CUEA, AMECEA office, conference secretariat, specific pastoral networks, justice and peace commissions, Publishing house like Pauline Publications. There is need though for capacity building of the personnel and evaluation of our institutions.

Self-sustainability

Hopes of increased self-reliance have been dampened by both widespread poverty and insufficient training of our faithful, with the result of serious economic problems in many areas of Church life.

Broken Body of Christ

The Church in Africa has experienced a new growth of internal sects (e.g. "Churches" of married priests) and a rising dissatisfaction of women and youth.

Marriage and the Family

These human institutions have come under strange and terrible pressures to re-define their nature and functions in modern society. **Traditional marriages, which founded families, are threatened by an increasing proposal of alternative unions and relationships, devoid of the concept of lasting commitments, non-heterosexual in character, and without the aim of procreation.** These already have advocates within the Church in certain parts of the continent. This **onslaught on marriage and family** is propelled and sustained by groups that churn out a glossary which is meant to replace good African traditional concepts and terms about marriage and family with new ones. The aim is to establish a new global ethic about marriage, family, human sexuality and the related issues of abortion, contraception, aspects of genetic engineering and genetically modified foods.

Drug-Trafficking and Arms-Trafficking:

Certain parts of the continent have become established pathways for the trafficking of drugs from Latin Americas into Europe. In West Africa, drug trafficking is cited as the underlying cause for the instability and political turmoil in Guinea Bissau, and now, also Guinea. When early in July this year, Guinea's military declared a maximum state of alert, it was because of threats of invasion, supported by drug cartels.

Drugs and Small Arms do not simply pass through parts of the continent and its islands, they have found users everywhere. Drug use and **addiction** among the youth is fast becoming the major source of dissipation of human capital in Africa and its islands, next to migration, conflicts and disease, such as, HIV-Aids and malaria.

Environment and Climate Change

The occasional cover of smog which hangs over most of East Africa, accompanied by diminished rainfall, drought and famine has destabilised the economy and killed millions of people, livestock and made our lakes and rivers to dry up. This points to how harsh climatic conditions on the continent generally are, and how adversely the precarious ecological balance in parts of Africa can be affected by the uncontrolled climate change on the planet. Some body has to plead for Africa on **climate change, green gas emission**, depletion of the **ozone layer** since she is the most affected.

Place and role of women in society

While the prominence, which is increasingly being given to **the place and role of women in society** is a happy development, the global emergence of **life-styles, values, attitudes** and **associations** which destabilize society is worrying. These attack the basic value of society (marriage and family), diminish its human capital (migration, drug-pushing and arms' trade) and endanger life on the planet.

Women in Africa are the **prime collaborators in the Church's evangelizing mission**, this gift of commitment must be strengthened to eradicate the suffering taking place on the continent. The enlightenment of women has lasting effects on well being of the family unit on which the church is founded. Women present the unique female image of God which still needs to be developed in the African church.

Women in Africa do perform 80% of all agricultural and 90% of all domestic labor. Remember that most of them perform this work without access to modern tools, training and essential facilities yet their work is rarely given any monetary value. This is a sign of one of the major forms of structure of "sin" engulfing our African family.

Women are capable of doing anything positive if they are given the right to attempt. Remember that if you educate a man you educated an individual, if you educate a woman you educated a family but if you educate women you educate a nation.

What do African women want?

- Women want a good and normal life for their children and their husbands. They desire a place where there is food to eat, where they can afford proper education for their children and where health facilities are a right and not a privilege for a few.
- They want the male dominated society to appreciate their contribution to faith, peace, development and safe guarding of the human family.
- They ask for an evangelized traditional culture where issues on inheritance and marriage follow gospel values.
- They ask legal rights which do not segregate on gender basis.

- Women from the grass-roots have little say on decision making. For most of them, “no” and “trouble” mean the same thing
- They ask a stop to domestic violence which falls on them as the first victims. Women are requesting to be loved and respected not to be used, beaten and abused
- Women are saying no to polygamy. Here man violates the principle of territoriality, and he avoids the blame. If the woman would dare do likewise she would pay for it or quit.
- Women are saying no to HIV/AIDS. Due to submissiveness, they have the highest ratio of victims. Men infect many women because they tell each woman that she is "the only one", while in actual fact this is not so.
- Women are demanding a stop to devil worship on the continent that is demanding human sacrifice of the first born children
- Women are demanding a stop to the selling of their daughters for prostitution in Europe and America.

Serious pastoral concerns and challenges to the Church in Africa

Through pastoral consultations the following can be considered serious concerns and challenges that need a solution. These are not discreet elements facing us but are all significantly interrelated in our pursuit of a Church as family of God.

1. **Deeper evangelization:** we know that as our Church in Africa grows in numbers we face the call to move to a more mature catechesis promoting a true Christian identity and a profound conversion of hearts. That Catholics could participate in political and ethnic clashes and that Catholic politicians could be involved in serious corruption of public resources tells us that we still have a long ways to go to promote a faith that does justice. There is need at every level for more serious formation in the Church Social Teaching (CST) and deeper implementation of an inculturation in our theology and not only in our ritual.

2. **Spirituality of reconciliation:** we need to strengthen the Body of Christ through efforts to advance a prayer life and a celebration of the Eucharist that puts reconciliation at the centre. This must include reconciliation with self, with neighbour, with our ancestors, with the earth and with God in whom we move, live and have our being. A renewed celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, often in the context of a communal penitential service, will greatly advance personal and social reconciliation.

3. **Centrality of Small Christian Community (SCC):** we have experienced that a properly trained and led SCC adds great value to the promotion of reconciliation. This is because deeper biblical reflection and more regular use of the pastoral circle empower the Christians to engage effectively in the social life around them. Here formation in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) at all levels must be a priority.

4. **Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue:** we know that endeavors to promote lasting reconciliation must include the strengths of religion. Hence we must be more effective in engaging other Christian churches in ecumenical exchanges at all levels. Moreover, cooperation wherever possible must be sought with Muslim persons and institutions, as well as persons and institutions of other faiths in Africa.

5. **Family Ministry:** we acknowledge that the First African Synod gave us the beautiful image of the **Church as the “Family of God”**. Thus we have all the more urgency to devise better pastoral responses to meet crises in family life such as **HIV and AIDS, orphans, poverty** and situations of refugees and displacement. **The family is a central focus for the formation of conscience** and the **maturing of moral judgments about the good and the right**, so essential for the promotion of reconciliation.

6. **Women’s Role:** we are mindful that **more than 50% of the Family of God are women and that between 70% to 80% of our active Church collaborations are women**. In African society, women are frequently not treated as equal to men, are left out of decision-making processes, are excluded from full educational opportunities and fair employment conditions, and are victims of shameful abuse (especially in the military conflicts in our region). Women have the prime responsibility of caring for those that are taken ill with HIV and AIDS and of orphans, while they themselves have the highest rates of infection from the pandemic. Within our Church in Africa we do not take advantage of God’s gifts in the talented and sensitive women in our midst. Yet it is very clear that neither our society nor our Church will do well unless we attitudinally and structurally recognize the role of women and reconcile with the unjust situations in which they are placed.

7. **Youth Concerns:** We often hear of the need to pay attention to youth because “they are the future of the Church.” But in fact, “they are the wealth of the present day.” As such they must be more effectively incorporated into the life of the Church, our SCCs and other organizations. Given responsibilities and formation, young women and men can and do play an important role in evangelization and in spiritual and social movements and are key actors in reconciliation efforts.

8. **Holistic Approach to HIV/AIDS:** It is important that a holistic approach be taken to dealing with the pandemic, seeing it neither as primarily a medical-pharmaceutical problem nor a matter solely of behavioural change. It is profoundly a development and justice issue. At a time when some official concerns to the pandemic are receding, we must acknowledge that the Body of Christ has AIDS, and provide a priority response fitting to the Family of God.

9. **Catholic Educational System:** We recognize that too many of our youth in our countries are out of school. We must find ways to strengthen the ministry of education that in earlier years so distinctively marked our Church’s apostolic endeavors, so that Catholic Schools at every level (including universities) are promoted. This should also include technical training. Our Catholic schools must not be seen as “exclusive” or commercial entities.

10. **Sustainability and Accountability:** we are aware that the strong desire expressed in the First African Synod for more self-sufficient African Church has in too many instances been frustrated by **severe poverty** situations in our dioceses and parishes. But it also has not been realized because we have failed to communicate to our people their responsibility to be generously supportive of the Church’s pastoral presence and activities. The practice of **“tithing,”** for instance, should be encouraged in variously appropriate forms.

11. **Church Relevance and Credibility:** we remember with humility the call of the First African Synod to be a Church that relates closely to our people’s real needs and demonstrates an unquestionable integrity of lifestyle among all our Church ministers. There should be some form of “monitoring and evaluation” (M&E) that checks our relevance and credibility in ways that strengthens an effective pastoral approach. A Church that desires to be in service to reconciliation, justice and peace must be both sensitive and credible.

12. **Church-State Relations:** we know that we need both attitudinal change and structural tools to more effectively promote the reconciliation so much needed in our region. This is reconciliation not only in violent conflict situations but also in circumstances of political economic, social and cultural differences. In too many instances the Church is ridiculed or ignored when it speaks out on issues of social justice. We often fail to take advantage of opportunities to contribute to public discourse about priorities and policies. Programmes such as parliamentary liaison offices and representation at regional bodies (e.g. AU) should be instituted and National and regional Justice and Peace Commissions should be strengthened.

13. **Peace and Security:** We appreciated that a more accurate historical understanding of how conflict situations have arisen in our region is necessary as we can only respond to the present if we know the past. Moreover we should see to the establishment of some permanent structures to respond to conflict crises so that there is not such a time-lag in reacting to something like electoral fraud.

14. **Political Governance:** We have experienced in some of our countries some improvements in democratic process (e.g. introduction of multi-partyism, constitutional reforms, human rights protection) but this has not been universal and sustained. Guided by our CST, our Church should be more active in advocacy efforts to improve governmental services, curb corruption, train politicians and public servants, form good citizenship, encourage responsible voting etc. In Africa the political parties are becoming the new dictators because they are the same forever in power.

15. **Poverty Eradication:** we cannot help but be moved and shamed by the impoverishment of the majority of the people in all our countries. The suffering and marginalization of these children of God is simply unacceptable. Advocacy efforts for better government policies and promotion of improved **church social services** must be a priority of pastoral response. The “preferential option for the poor” should provide a fundamental question to evaluate government, business, church and personal choices: “What does this decision mean for the poor?”

16. **Environmental issues:** we know that the challenges of climate change and global warming are particularly affecting our local people. Serious draughts are causing food security problems and promoting human migrations that are not always peaceful. In several of our countries, extractive industries are creating pollution troubles that foreign investors are not always responsive to. Forests are cut, but new trees are not planted. **Pope Benedict XVI has cautioned us that if we want peace among ourselves, we must make peace with creation. Ecological reconciliation is very important for social reconciliation.**

Something to think about

- Africa needs to stand up and claim its own distinct nature, characteristic and contributions to the world. Queen Sheba a woman from Africa visited King Solomon with 5.000 Kgs of Gold and in return she enriched the faith in One God among us
- Africa needs to rejoice in its appreciation of human and spiritual values like the hospitality offered to Mary Mother of God and her family in the time of persecution.
- Africa needs to realize the richness of their God given gift to celebrate even when in pain. One of the Magi was from Africa and went to visit the Holy Family in Bethlehem and danced when he saw the new born Jesus.
- Africa needs to put the price of its wealth of natural resources and not allow them to be plundered. The women are indeed the custodians of Africa’s wealth that is the people.

- Africa needs to set heavy penalties against its leaders who sell their resources for arms or money, most of which they stash overseas while their people starve at home; most of them women and their children.

Conclusions

Evangelizing Church in Africa and Madagascar need to **be practical, concrete and realizable.**

There is need of a **clear plan of strategic follow-up** to be put in place for instructions about the results of evangelization and continuous implementation of recommendations. We must assure time lines, regular Monitoring and Evaluation review.

Evangelisation **must be seen as a process** and not simply as an event. That is, we should communicate to the people what is happening elsewhere through electronic and print media. Africa has to arise within herself the **spirit of pride, humility and hope so as to stay focused on her journey to self** deliverance.

Africa is **the “cradle of the civilization,”** the place that was home to **humanity’s earliest mothers and fathers.** We come from a continent blessed to have **received Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus as refugees.** We come from a church that is growing with the promising vibrancy and a youthful vitality.

Africa is **humble** to recognize that it is a continent that has been marked by too much **blood-shedding and corruption in recent years.** Many of our problems are due to political leaders who show insensitivity to the needs of their people, a point raised also by Pope Benedict XVI during his first pastoral visit to Africa in March. Africa’s humility obliges her to recognize that she did not always implement to fullest the good directions offered by the gospel.