

The Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops

A reflection on its necessity, merits and limits

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1. Introduction

The Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops was held in Rome from the 4th to the 28th of October 2009, with the main theme of *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world*. The two major reasons that necessarily led to it are hidden in the two major parts of its theme. The aim of this post-synodal reflection, which I have been asked to make from standpoint of a theologian who helped to prepare for it, is to bring out such reasons from their latency to evidence in order then to attempt an assessment of the Synod, its greatness and limits, its merits and weakness. The reflection is thus in two chapters.

1.1. What led to the Second Assembly – the two major reasons for the Synod

From the point of view of first part of the theme, namely «The Church in Africa», what led to the convocation of this Second Assembly for Africa by Pope Benedict XVI was the need for a proper *understanding* of the Church (in Africa) as (the) Family of God¹. From the point of view of the second part of the theme, namely being «in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world», was the need for a proper *practice* of its pastoral Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace from the point of view of its Christ-given identity as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, by the Church in Africa as family of God.

¹ Cfr. JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, 14.9.1995, 63.

2. On the greatness and limits, merits and weakness of the Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops

2.1. Critical appraisal

With regards to the greatness and limits, merits and weakness, of the Second Assembly for Africa, it can be said: 1) that this Second Assembly concentrated more, and almost exclusively, one-sidedly, on the second part of the theme, hence on the pastoral work as the second reason for the convocation by Benedict XVI, and it therefore dealt almost exhaustively with this second part and almost ignored entirely the first part of the theme, namely the doctrine as the first reason for the convocation, and 2) that with regards to the Future of Africa made concrete in the African Youth of today, this Second Assembly, though it did not omit the necessary consideration of the Youth, its ruminations over them fell short of the level at which they had been earlier addressed in the preceding First Assembly. In fact, the recommendations for the Youth by this Second Assembly could not come up to the same level of Instruction on their co-responsibility for Africa as the First Assembly which empowered them had set a record in this regard. There may be several other points of discontinuity in spite of continuity of the First Assembly by the Second Assembly in doctrinal matters but this one regarding the Future of Africa made concrete in the Youth is the gravest.

Furthermore: it was John Paul II who had convoked the First Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops and presided it as an Assembly that was at the end, popularly called the Synod of the *Resurrection*, while Benedict XVI convoked the Second Assembly and presided it as an Assembly that was at the end, popularly called the Synod of the *Pentecost*. But between the two Assemblies, there was no Synod of the *Ascension*. The popular jump from the Resurrection to the Pentecost is not unconnected with the jump made by the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Second Assembly over the important instruction given by John Paul II² to the African youth of today on what to do, in order to help Africa *rise to the heights* that could enable it keep pace with the rest of the world in the face of the on-going rapid development of humankind on earth, a prophetic instruction well retained in the *Lineamenta* for the Second

² «Dear young people, the Synod asks you to take in hand the development of your countries, and to work for its renewal with fidelity to your cultural heritage (e.g. *the absence of atheism and the abundant presence of strong belief in God and frequent recourse to Him*), through a sharpening of your scientific and technical expertise, and above all through the witness of your Christian faith» (JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 115).

Assembly³ and guaranteeing for the addressed Youth a neat continuity of pontifical instructions between John Paul II and Benedict XVI on what to do, but suddenly and surprisingly, and in a grossly disappointing manner, suppressed in the *Instrumentum Laboris* and therefore hushed and no longer mentioned during the Second Assembly by anybody for reasons still unknown till today.

Furthermore: Before the Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops was convoked under the title «The Church in Africa in the Service to *Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*», it had been considered necessary to clarify first of all what Church means, in order to avoid narrow and reductionist conceptions that do not do *justice* to that Church in Africa which is in service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. For, the Ecclesiology of such a Church must be that of the unity resulting from the *reconciliation*, coordination, and communion – communication, union and sharing – of Church as Family of God with Church as People of God, with Church as Mystical Body of Christ, with Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit, with Church as Communion, and with Church as Sacrament of universal salvation etc. The need to work out a systematic synthesis that *reconciles in itself* the various images of the Church through coordinating the image of the Church as Family of God with the other images of the Church, under the leading principle of the structure of the God of the Family as of the *triune* God that has revealed Himself in and through the Godman (*Theandros*) Jesus Christ, thus the Trinitarian-theandric structure, as the proper regulating principle of the coordination, is to put forward a guide to proper practice of the Church's mission of reconciliation and communion in its commitment to serve society through proclaiming the Gospel of the saving justice and peace and joy that the Holy Spirit brings, rather than using only one single ecclesiology⁴, isolated from the other ecclesiologies, to do such mission of holistic, integral and universal character.

Finally: The need for the proper understanding of the Church in Africa as the Family of God, goes back to a certain steadily increasing impression which the reception of the Ecclesiology of the First Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (held in Rome in 1994) in the period from 1995 to 2005 had awoken among the faithful. For, the First Assembly understood the Church namely as Family of God⁵. But in the post-synodal reception that ensued, the impression arose that the emphasis

³ Cfr. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Lineamenta. II Special Assembly for Africa: The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20060627_ii-assembly-africa_en.html (1.02.2010), 23.

⁴ Church as Family of God, or Church as salt of the earth and Light of the world, etc.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63.

of such a doctrine was on the structural outfit of the Church, on the internal hierarchical structure of the people of God organized within the coordinates of Parent-children-relationship and brother-sister-relationship among the members, and not on the functional outreach of the Church, on the missionary functions of the people of God *ad extra*, organized within the coordinates of – to put it in biblical terms – «Light (that God the Creator of the World is) and Salt (that the creatures on earth should be to one another)», or – In the language of the Second Vatican Council – of «the intimate union of men with God and the unity of the entire humankind», thus – in systematic theological terms – of «man's relationship with God and man's relation with fellow men». But the mission of the Church *ad extra*, mission to the people in darkness who need light, belongs to the very *nature* of the Church as far as the Church is *born* in Christ in whose person as God the people that are in darkness see a great light and whose star the wise on the move see and follow, up to Him. That is why it was necessary for the Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops to put an emphasis on the Church as light of the world, *lumen mundi*, in the sense of the light of the peoples, *lumen gentium*, as of those who do not believe in Christ as the great Light in the world (*Lux mundi*), a Light that shines in darkness but without the darkness recognizing it, a Light that as a person, divine person, God, the Creator, came to His own, to His very creatures, but without being received by them!

Thus, the Assembly put an emphasis on the Church as *lumen mundi* in its mission *ad gentes*, in the language of the Second Vatican Council. But this new accentuation was not intended as a radical shift of emphasis from the Church as Family of God to the Church as light of the World, rather it was intended to inculcate that the same Church that is the Family of God in its essence is light of the world in its function, i.e. in its missionary activity. To conserve both dimensions – the essence and the function – of the Church and – through the accentuation of the luminary and enlightening dimension – buttress the relevance, pertinence, necessity, of the Church for the human society, there was the need to complete the imagery of the Church as Family and as Light through a third image of the Church that conveys the idea of conservation and of savour, and no other image could be more adequate for this than that of the salt. The image of the Church as salt thereby goes together with that of the Church as light. That is why, after the First Assembly had put the accent on *the Church as Family*, the Second Assembly puts the accent on *the Church as Salt of the Earth and Light of the World*.

2.2 Making up for the missing part: The need for proper understanding of the Church as Family of God

With regard to its original and proper understanding, the Church as Family of God is that supernatural family of divine and human persons which begins with God as Father.

It is a family the primary origin of which is that uncreated divine Person that has no origin but is the origin of all other persons than Himself and, as Father, implies having a Son, and truly has a Son, generated (not adopted) by Him as by the Absolute. Spirit itself means intelligent living being. But the living being is characterized by the capacity not only of perceiving and reacting to what is perceived, and of movement, of respiration, of nurturing (others and or himself) and of (structural and or performative) growth, but also of reproducing himself and or producing others. He is the Absolute means that he is the only One who does not depend on any other person than Himself for His being and, therefore (since: *agree sequitur esse*), for His actions. Thus: since God is Father only by having a Son (because to be a Father is to have a Son, and to be a Son is to have a Father: *Pater esse et Filium habere convertuntur, Filius esse et Patrem habere convertuntur*), the Family of God is a supernatural family that begins with the two divine persons, the Father and the Son as two distinct but inseparable uncreated persons who presuppose one another, whereby the Father generated the Son without the help of any other than Himself.

But like the foundation alone does not yet make a house, an edifice, so too a man and a woman alone do not yet make a family; they have to pass from being mere (marital) couple to establishing a family by raising children only together with whom they constitute a family, the family of the two of them together. *So too* God the Father and His Son alone do not yet make the Family of God. They have to pass from being merely uncreated divine Origin and Offspring to establishing a family of theirs through the Father's raising of *created human persons* as brothers and sisters (and mother) first of the Son and then only in and through the Son, of one another. And it is only together with the created persons that the two uncreated persons, the Father and the Son, constitute a family, the family of the two of them as of two divine persons, their family. *But* the created human persons raised by the Father and the Son are the brothers and sisters and mother of the Son only in and through their being doers of the Father's will and believers in him. *But* no one can do (cf. *agere*) the Will of God except, on the one hand, by the supernatural divine power and assistance (cf. *gratia ut actio divina*) of the Holy Spirit and unless, on the other hand, the one has the natural human capacity (cf. *potentia*) to obey God (cf. the *potentia oboedientialis*).

Mary is the perfect example of this double (divine-human) condition for man doing the Will of God, hence for man's being sister or mother or brother of the Son of God and, thus, of one's being child of God the Father and, hence, member of the family of God. For, Mary could not conceive the Son of God in her womb who was willed by God the Father unless (*ex parte Dei*) by the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit as power of the Most High and unless (*ex parte hominis*) she had a womb.

Therefore, with regard to «working out the theology of the Church as Family, with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church», one can hold firm to the following results of the explanations above of the proper meaning of the image of the Church as Family of God: 1) The Theology of the Church as family of God is constituted, on the one hand, by *the Abbatology* of such a Church, *the Christology* and *the Pneumatology* – and hence, with these three together – *the Trinitology* of such a Church and, on the other hand, by *the Christian Anthropology* and *the Mariology* of such a Church.