

# *The African Synod*

## *An Ecumenical and Inter-Faith perspective*



**Working paper I**

**The African Synod (Synod of Bishops for Africa: Second Special Assembly)**

*“The Church in Africa in service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”.*

## **THE AFRICAN SYNOD IN AN ECUMENICAL AND INTER-FAITH PERSPECTIVE**

### **Proposals for reflexion and action in Groups and Small Christian Communities**

In April 1994, Pope John Paul II opened the “Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa” in Rome. It was an unforgettable moment for the African Church. Bishops from the whole continent of Africa came together to look at the life of the African Church and her evangelizing mission towards the year 2000: “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1, 8)!

In September 1995 the Pope came to Africa to celebrate the Synod on African soil and brought us the fruits of that Synod expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation “The Church in Africa”. He told all Christians in Africa: “The Synod is over, the Synod has just begun!”

This means: the Synod of the Bishops in Rome is over; the Synod is now starting in our diocese, parishes and Christian communities. The great challenge is to study the teaching of the Synod, to discuss the important issues in our communities in order to transform our personal lives and our communities in the spirit of the Synod.

Pope John Paul took his invitation at heart and announced in the year 2004 his intention to bring together a second special assembly of the African Synod. His successor Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the initiative, specifying the topic: “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, 13-16.

The situation in Africa has changed considerably since 1994. The new reality requires a thorough study in view of a renewed evangelization effort today. The Church in Africa, “Family of God” has to consider this reality and make Africa more and more the “Homeland of Jesus Christ”.

Church documents are at times difficult to understand and to apply in daily life. These working papers offer some introduction to various themes of the Synod and help us to share and discuss their meaning for our personal life and the Church in Africa. Small Christian communities and different groups of Christians are invited to become aware of the im-

plication of the themes for our Church life. Sharing in common reflection and discussions will allow us to look to those issues together in the light of the Gospel and to inspire us and become more and more living witnesses, credible and effective, at the service of our African Brothers and Sisters.

## **Listening to the Synod**

### **“The Church in Africa in service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”**

#### **Chapter I.: “Africa at the dawn of the 21st century”**

#### **Chapter I.3. n.24- 29: “Religions in service to Reconciliation, Peace and Justice in Africa”**

*“In the commitment to reconciliation, justice and peace, Christians cannot ignore the prayer of the Lord and Master of Life: “May they all be one... so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (Jn 17:21). The shared basis of African culture, enriched by the Word of Life, is a great advantage in seeking together ways and means to make the Christian evangelical witness more and more credible. Every Christian is called to promote any initiative that favors unity”.*

#### **Introductory text to the Synod, Lineamenta n. 29**

*“With this in mind, the African religious and cultural setting can be an ally in the dialogue with other religions and other Christians for a profound evangelization effort and human promotion...”*

#### **Introductory text to the Synod, Lineamenta n. 29**

*“In considering these topics, attention must be given to the opportunities provided by dialogue with some Muslim communities and members of African Traditional Religion (ATR). These religions are open to collaborate in bringing about reconciliation, justice and peace. Undoubtedly, there can be no peace without collaboration among the different religions”*

#### **Introductory text to the Synod, Lineamenta n. 24**

### **Aware that all Churches and different Faith Groups in Africa are invited to be:**

#### **“Salt of the earth, and light of the World” Mt 5:13-14;**

We are more and more conscious and challenged to share as Christians belonging to different Churches and even believers of other Religions a the common responsibility to the service of our people in the whole of the African community. We realize more and more that we are so different, and sometimes divided and opposed, but we share a common call to build a more human and African community in the name of our religious inspiration.

The needs of the African communities and the people we serve, invite us to recognize and engage together in that same service. Many initiatives exist and are executed in a dispersed way at the service of the same communities, overlapping each other, without recognizing their similarity and common inspiration. Sometimes the projects of our Churches and faith communities risk to oppose or hamper each other's efforts in a regrettable way, spoiling efforts and financial investments.

## **We would like to discover in a common approach with the Christian Churches and other faiths:**

How the invitation of a common service to the “African Family” is a God-given opportunity to join efforts and collaborate in this service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.

In an ecumenical spirit of mutual recognition and appreciation of our common responsibility we hear the challenge for a common service. We would like to share the invitation for that service with our brothers and sisters of all Christian Churches and other faith communities in the African continent and particularly in the context of Kenya.

## **We propose and engage in the implementation of our service, as far as possible:**

- ▶ **To know locally** how other faith communities and Christian Churches are engaged in the service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.
1. In a fraternal and simple way we inquire and learn what is done by those communities concerning the most urgent and challenging human situations.
  2. We *appreciate their planning and activities* and share our appreciations.
  3. We *express our solidarity* without any intrusion.
    - ▶ **To share our own initiatives** without any complex of superiority **and build them up**, as much as possible in **mutual understanding and common concern**.

We *share our social analysis* of the human situations and discover together the need to serve as a faith Communities where our service seems to be useful and possible.

We *give witness of our religious motivations* and share the call to service we discern together.

- ▶ **To discern together if a common service becomes evident and possible.**

## **We listen to the Spirit of God, to promote common friendship and awareness that will move us into shared initiatives, in due time.**

Common projects need wisdom and *good leadership and ongoing evaluation*.

We avoid together *human temptations* such as jealousy, the complex of superiority, etc, and we resist them in common discernment.

We give a *regular feed back and account* to the appropriate authorities for assessment and confirmation.

**“Africa will find the strength and energies needed for this rebirth”!**

*(Introductory text to the Synod, Lineamenta n. 29)*

## **Commission for Ecumenism**

Email: [ecumenism@catholicchurch.or.ke](mailto:ecumenism@catholicchurch.or.ke)

“**Synod**” is a Greek word meaning “walking together”. The Synod invites us to walk together Bishops and priests, lay and religious, women and men as, believers of different faith communities as the one Family of God in Africa. Walking together in these changing times inspired by the faith of Jesus we seek new ways to live as Christians under the guidance of His Spirit.

“**Encounter and Dialogue**” are different step stones to meet and build our African Society. Our African culture of “hospitality” invites us to open our doors, to sit together and share and enrich each other. Christians and people of different faiths will search together to enrich and inspire each other, each one offers his wisdom confident that a real and honest sharing will challenges each one for a profound conversion.

### **Some useful document:**

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# *The African Synod*

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### **Working paper 3**

### **The African Synod (Synod of Bishops for Africa: Second Special Assembly)**

*“The Church in Africa in service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”.*

## **ENCOUNTER AND DIALOGUE WITH OTHER FAITHS AND ESPECIALLY ISLAM**

### **Proposals for reflex ion and action in Groups and Small Christian Communities**

In April 1994 Pope John Paul II opened the “Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa” in Rome. It was an unforgettable moment for the African Church. Bishops from the whole continent of Africa came together to look at the life of the African Church and her evangelizing mission towards the year 2000: “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1, 8)! In September 1995 the Pope came to Africa to celebrate the Synod on African soil and brought us the fruits of that Synod expressed in the Apostolic Exhortation “The Church in Africa.”

Indeed the great challenge is to study the teaching of the Synod, to discuss the important issues in our communities in order to transform our personal lives and our communities in the spirit of the Synod.

Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the initiative of his predecessor in the year 2007, specifying the topic: “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, 13-16.

The situation in Africa has changed considerably since 1994. The new reality requires a thorough study in view of a renewed evangelization effort today. The Church in Africa, “Family of God” has to consider this reality and make Africa more and more the “Homeland of Jesus Christ.”

Church documents are at times difficult to understand and to apply in daily life. These working papers offer some introduction to various themes of the Synod and help us to share and discuss their meaning for our personal life and the Church in Africa. Small Christian communities and different groups of Christians are invited to become aware of the implication of the themes for our Church life. Sharing in common reflex ion and discussions will allow us to look to those issues together in the light of the Gospel and to inspire us and become more and more living witnesses, credible and effective, at the service of our African Brothers and Sisters.

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## **Listening to the Synod**

### **Dialogue is the Way of life of God's Family.**

Members of a family share their daily joys and sorrows and face the problems of life together. Everyone has something to contribute. In our social life and contacts with other people, each one should have a voice, a role to play and a contribution to make in the decisions of the community.

Today we realize that there are true values in every culture and religion, and there are also negative elements. Africa has a great wealth of cultures and values to share with all faith communities and cultures.

Living in the "global village" means that believers of different religions interact on a daily basis. Traditional ethical, moral and religious values are constantly questioned and occasionally eroded. This is true for all religions. How do we react to these challenges. Do we face them, confront them, discuss them ... or do we turn in on ourselves and refuse the challenges.

*Read Apostolic Exhortation: "The Church in Africa"*

*n.65 Evangelization and Inculturation. Dialogue*

### **How to promote "Dialogue and Encounter" with Brothers and Sisters of Other Religions?**

Encounter, dialogue and listening to others and sharing our own beliefs with others, is not a choice. It is a must. It is part of our Christian mission to be a witness of Christ to all.

Dialogue and encounter are founded in our Christian belief that:

- ▶ All peoples have a common origin and common end which is God
- ▶ In a mysterious way Jesus is in communion with each and every human person
- ▶ The "new commandment of love" embraces all the members of the "human family"
- ▶ In a mysterious way, the Holy Spirit is present in the hearts of all persons
- ▶ The will and the desire of God is to liberate and save all human person.

The Encounter and Dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other religions is even more urgent in our world of to-day. God's plan is to bring all of us together in one Family: "He has let us know the mystery of his purpose which he determined beforehand in Christ, that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in heaven and on earth. (Eph. 1.9-10).

*Read Apostolic Exhortation: "The Church in Africa"*

*n. 27-28A historic moment of grace. God's will to save Africa.*

*n..55 Evangelization and Inculturation. The Church mission*

*n. 79 Present-day challenges. A reconciled Community.*

*n. 137 You shall be my witnesses. Holiness and Mission*

Muslims have been present in sub-Saharan Africa almost since the beginning of Islam. African Muslims are growing now days more aware of their identity, more conscious of their belonging to the "umma", the worldwide Muslim community. African Christians and Muslims have, for the most part, lived together for centuries. Some families have members who are Muslims and others who are Christians. Some tensions and sometimes violent confrontations may take place. The need for understanding and openness to encounter and dialogue is more urgent now than ever. Since the second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Catholic Church encourages dialogue and encounter with Muslims.

### **How can we promote the Spirit of Dialogue with other Religions?**

Unfortunately, religion that is meant to unite all people often divides them. To make religion a way to greater unity, we have to promote sharing rather than confrontation.

How can Encounter and Dialogue, respect and tolerance be learned?

- ▶ Catholic schools should be open to all without discrimination. They should be places where initiation to dialogue of life among young people of different religions is started.
- ▶ Catholic groups should be promoting such values as listening, respect and tolerance.

- ▶ Christians should be helped to discover the positive values within religions and Islam.

### **What can be Obstacles and Dangers to Dialogue?**

- ▶ Religious fundamentalism and fanaticism can lead to intolerance and violence in the name of God.
- ▶ Making compromises and taking as less important that what is the centre of our Christian faith, what makes us Christians: our belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and Jesus as the only Saviour of humankind.
- ▶ Dialogue with people of other religions does not mean that we stop our mission of evangelization, of being witnesses of Christ to the world. Dialogue is one of the many ways in which we are called to be witnesses of Christ.

### **Listening to the Scriptures**

**Wisdom 9, 16-18:** “It is hard enough for us to work out what is on earth, laborious to know what lies within our reach; and we could ever have known your will, had you not given Wisdom and sent your holy Spirit from above? Thus have the paths of those on earth been straightened and people have been saved by Wisdom”

**Syrah 43, 30 – 33:** “Exalt the Lord in your praises as high as you may –still the Lord surpasses you. Who has ever seen God to describe Him? Many mysteries remain even greater than these, for we have seen only a few of his works, the Lord himself having created all things and given wisdom to those who are devout”.

**Acts of the Apostles 17, 25-28:** ‘It is He who gives everything – including breath and life to everyone. From one single principle he not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire world but God decreed the times and limits of their habitation. And he did this so that they might seek the deity and, by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him; and indeed he is not far from any of us. Since it is in him that we live, and move and exist’.

### **Apostolic Exhortation “The Church in Africa” of the Holy Father John Paul II**

“Openness to dialogue is the Christian’s attitude inside the community as well as with other believers and with men and women of goodwill”.

Commitment to dialogue must also embrace all Muslims of good will. Christians cannot forget that many Muslims try to imitate the faith of Abraham and to live the demands of the Decalogue. In this regard the Message of the Synod emphasizes that the living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of History, is the Father of the one great human family to which we all belong. As such, he wants to bear witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for human progress and development at all levels. Far from wishing to be the one in whose name would kill other people, he requires believers to join together in the service of life and in justice and peace.

Christians and Muslims are called to commit themselves to promoting a dialogue free from the risks of false promises or militant fundamentalism and to raising their voices against unfair policies and practices, as well as against the lack of reciprocity in matters of religious freedom.

*Read Apostolic Exhortation: “The Church in Africa “ n.65-66 Evangelization and Inculturation.*

## **The voice of the Vatican Council**

“Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God... Those also can attain the salvation who brought no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”

“The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the social values found among these men.”

*Vatican II. Constitution of the Church. n. 16*

*The relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. n. 2*

## **Questions to be asked, actions to be taken**

All Christians, not only religious leaders and specialists, are invited to engage in encounter and dialogue with other religious. Encounter with believers of other religions can become a daily experience for **every Christian** in our multicultural world. We can meet other believers of other religions in our own family, in our neighborhood, in our village or city.

But how do we go about it? How to get really involved?

First of all we have to **know ourselves** and our own faith, not in order to prove that we are right, but so as to **present ourselves** as valuable and **trustworthy witnesses**.

How do I/do we grow in this self-consciousness?

How can I/can we become a more credible witness?

Then we could make an effort to better **understand the point of view of the other believer**, out of respect for the truth and also to avoid misunderstanding and illusions.

How do I/do we come to that?

There are different possible ways of entering into Dialogue:

- ▶ Dialogue in daily life: living in a real spirit of openness and contact with other believers, sharing sorrows and joys of daily living.
- ▶ Dialogue through common action: Christians and non-Christians alike working together to realize the integral development and liberation of all people.
- ▶ What can I/can we do concretely? How to go about it?

## **Commission for Ecumenism March 2008**

*Email: ecumenism@catholicchurch.or.ke*

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### Working paper 2

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## **ENCOUNTER AND DIALOGUE AMONG THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES**

### **Proposals for reflex ion and action in Groups and Small Christian Communities**

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**“Encounter and Dialogue”** are different step stones to meet and build our African Society. Our African culture of “hospitality” invites us to open our doors, to sit together and share and enrich each other. Christians and people of different faiths will search together to enrich and inspire each other, each one offers his wisdom confident that a real and honest sharing will challenges each one for a profound conversion.

## **Listening to the Synod**

### **The Church has firstly to become “Good News” herself.**

Those who bring the Gospel to others Christians must first of all accept Jesus and his message into their own lives. Without personal conversion we are not credible messengers of God.

The Church must begin by being evangelized herself by **constant conversion and renewal**, in order to evangelize the world with credibility. Her members must all deepen their faith. Entrance into the kingdom of God demands a change of mentality and behavior and a life of witness in word and deed.

Read Apostolic Exhortation: “The Church in Africa “

n. 47. Present-day problems of the Church in Africa: More profound Evangelization.

n. 87. “You shall be my witness in Africa: Witness and holiness.

For the baptized the great challenge will always be that of leading a **Christian life according to the commitments of Baptism**, the sacrament which signifies death to sin and daily resurrection to new life. (cf. Rom 6:4-5) Without this, it will be difficult for Christ’s disciples to be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” Mt 5:13,14.

Read Apostolic Exhortation: “The Church in Africa “n. 74. In the light of the third millennium, present-day challenges: need for baptism, urgency of Evangelization.

The Church proclaims the Good News of Christ in two ways:

**By the proclamation** of the Word of God she received from the Lord;

By the **witness of life**.

The way Christ’s disciples shows the faith, hope and love which is in them, even to the point of martyrdom. The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Do we really preach what we live”? Genuine witness is essential to the authentic proclamation of faith today, especially the witness of sincere mutual love.

Read Apostolic Exhortation: “The Church in Africa “

n. 55. Evangelization and inculturation. The Church’s Mission n. 77. The power of witness.

### **God’s Family is experienced in Living Christian Communities**

The Church as Family cannot reach all her possibilities as Church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships.

The **characteristics of such communities are:**

- ▶ To be engaged in *evangelizing themselves* ; to bring the Good News to others
- ▶ To be communities which *pray and listen to God’s Word*;
- ▶ To encourage the members to *take on responsibility* and learn to live as Church;
- ▶ To *reflect on different human problems* in the light of the Gospel;
- ▶ To become communities committed living Christ’s love for everybody, a love which *transcends the limits of the natural solidarity* of clans, tribes or other interest groups.

Read Apostolic Exhortation: “The Church in Africa “

n. 89. Agents of Evangelization. Vital Christian Communities

### **Dialogue is the Way of life of God’s Family.**

Members of a family share their daily joys and sorrows and face the problems of life together. Everyone has something to contribute. In the life of the Church, each member should have a voice, a role to play and a contribution to make in the decisions of the community.

Read : “The Church in Africa “ n. 88. The agents of Evangelization. n. 65. Dialogue

## **How to promote Unity with our Christian Brothers and Sisters of Other Churches?**

Listen to others and sharing my own beliefs with others in dialogue is not a choice for me, it is a “must”. It is part of my Christian mission to be a witness of Christ to all.

The Encounter and Dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations is even more urgent because Jesus Himself prayed for Unity “That they may be one, as You Father you are in me, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” cf. Jn: 17.21

We are invited to develop an ecumenical dialogue with all baptized brothers and sisters of other Churches in order that the unity for which Christ prayed may be achieved, in order that their service to the peoples of the African Continent may make the Gospel more credible in the eyes of those who are searching for God.

*Read Apostolic Exhortation: “The Church in Africa” n. 65. Evangelization and Inculturation: Dialogue*

## **Listening to the Scriptures.**

**Acts of the Apostles 4, 32:** “The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul”.

**Letter to the Romans 15, 5:** “The God of perseverance and encouragement gives you all the same purpose, following the example of Jesus”.

**Letter to the Romans 15, 7:** “Accept one another, then, for the sake of God’s glory as Christ accepted you”.

**Second letter to the Corinthians 13, 11:** “Brothers and Sisters, we wish you joy; try to grow perfect; encourage one another; have a common mind and live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.

**First Letter to the Corinthians 1, 10:** Brothers and Sisters I urge you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, not to have factions among yourselves, but all of you to be in agreement in what you profess; so that you are perfectly united in your beliefs and judgments.

**John. 17, 21:** May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.

## **Reflections**

By virtue of her mission to shed on the whole world the radiance of the Gospel message, and to unify under one Spirit all men and women of whatever nation, race or culture, the Church stands forth as a sign of that unity which allows honest dialogue and gives it vigour.

Such mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. Let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is non yet defined, and charity in any case.

Our hearts embrace also those brothers and sisters and communities not yet living with us in full communion; to them we are linked nonetheless by our profession of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and by the bond of Charity.

*Read in the Second Vatican Council: The Church in the Modern World n. 92.*

The call for Christian unity made by the Second Vatican Council with such impassioned commitment is finding an ever greater echo in the hearts of believers. The Catholic Church committed herself irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical journey, thus heeding in the Spirit of the Lord, who teaches people to interpret carefully the “signs of the times”.

“The call for Christian Unity”. Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II on Commitment to Ecumenism. n. 1&2

## **Questions to be asked, actions to be taken**

**Every Dialogue has its roots in God, in the Holy Trinity. The whole of our History of Salvation is a Dialogue between God and Humanity.**

- ▶ What do I/do we understand by Dialogue?
- ▶ Let us consider how God engages in Dialogue with his people, in the Bible.

**To make “encounter and dialogue” possible and fruitful, some fundamental attitudes are required:**

Am I/are we ready to respect the differences among us, discovering that diversity can become a mutual enrichment?

**Trust:** Am I/are we ready to accept “the others” as real partner, interested in our exchange and collaboration?

Do I/do we accept their intentions as sincere? Am I/are we ready to accept their reactions, observations and qualities and personal gifts?

**Readiness for reconciliation and fraternal relationships.**

Am I/are we ready to make the first step, to initiate the dialogue, in spite of past divergences and oppositions which remains even up to to-day?

Do I/do we want to overthrow or to lord it over the other. Am I/are we ready to discover together with the others God’s will, ready to make our common discovery a reality?

**Dialogue needs time and patience**

What are the actions and initiatives I am/we are ready to take in our community?

Am I/are we ready to know better the other person or the other group?

Am I/are we ready to commit myself to the long and arduous road of journeying together towards a deeper understanding of one another

- ▶ Am I/are we ready to pray with each other others?
- ▶ Am I/are we ready to plan together and to cooperate with others in the civil and social in daily life.

## **Commission for Ecumenism March 2008**

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The voice of the African Bishops n.48 Paulines publications 2005

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