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Africa's dynamism real but also deceptive, cardinal says

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tAfrican Catholicism?s explosive growth and vitality are real, Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana said this morning during the opening session of the second Synod for Africa, but also in a sense deceptive.

t Turkson, the *relator*, or general secretary, of the synod, pointed to four specific challenges:

?tThe fact that the church ?hardly exists in large parts north of the equator,? meaning that it?s largely concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa;
?t?The fidelity and commitment of some clergy and religious to their vocations,? perhaps a veiled reference to scandals such the one that erupted last May in the Central African Republic, when Archbishop Paulin Pomodimo resigned after a Vatican investigation revealed that several priests were living more or less openly with women and the children they had fathered;
?t?The loss of members to new religious movements and sects? ? which, in today?s Africa, is likely a reference to the rapid expansion of Christian Pentecostalism ? as well as a tendency for young Africans to lose their faith when they relocate to Europe and North America;
?tNeed for ?a conversion that is deep and permanent.?

Speaking in English, Turkson delivered the *relatio ante disceptationem*, or ?report before the discussion,? intended to set the table for the deliberations to follow. The Synod for Africa will meet Oct. 4-25 in Rome.

In many ways, Africa was the greatest missionary success story for Roman Catholicism in the twentieth century. The Catholic population shot up from 1.9 million in 1900 to almost 165 million today. More than forty percent of the adult baptisms in the world take place in Africa, considered one of the most reliable indicators of missionary success.

All that?s been celebrated for some time, but Turkson said this morning that there are other encouraging signs that Catholicism is maturing and taking root on the continent. Among other things, he said that Africans are taking leadership positions within missionary congregations, local churches are aggressively pursuing financial self-reliance, and Catholic institutions such as universities and centers for formation are developing.

Turning to the broader social and political scene, Turkson pointed to several signs of hope in Africa:

?tOut of 48 nations in sub-Saharan Africa, only four are presently at war: Somalia, Sudan, Niger and parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. ?Indeed, there are fewer wars in Africa than in Asia,? Turkson said.
?tPublic officials responsible for war crimes are being held accountable in international courts, including, Turkson said, Charles Taylor of Liberia.
?tAfrica represents the second most important emerging market in the world after China, Turkson said, pointing to a recent G8 summit that defined Africa as ?a continent of opportunities.? He cited India and China in

particular as countries eager to developing economic relationships with Africa.
?tAfrican leaders have created a framework for promoting integral development and good governance, in the form of the ?New Partnership for Africa?s Development,? or NEPAD.

All that, Turkson argued, suggests that international discussion of Africa should focus not merely on its difficulties, but also its accomplishments.

?The truth is that Africa has been burdened for too long by the media with everything that is loathsome to humankind,? he said. ?It is time to shift gears and have the truth about Africa told with love.?

Yet Turkson also described several socio-political challenges facing Africa, which, he suggested, the synod must consider. They included:

?tEthnic conflict;
?tMigration of Africans to Europe, America and the Far East, who often end up living in ?servile conditions? that Turkson compared to the slave trade;
?tCorruption and bad governance;
?tThe need for economic models emphasizing trade rather than aid;
?tAttacks on marriage and the family;
?tDrug trafficking and the arms trade;
?tThe environment and climate change.

?Africa?s emergence should be the work of Africans and be spearheaded by them,? Turkson said. ?Hearts must be converted and eyes healed to appreciate new ways of administering public wealth for the common well-being.?

Promoting that aim, Turkson said, amounts to ?the remit of the evangelizing mission of the church on the continent and the islands.?

A scripture scholar who holds a doctorate from the prestigious Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, Turkson devoted a considerable chunk of his address to exploring the Biblical roots of the concept of reconciliation, which is the synod?s central theme.

Among other things, Turkson asserted that the ?spirit of capitalism? isn?t adequate to capture the Biblical sense of justice. Capitalism, Turkson argued, tends to see justice in terms of the fulfillment of contracts, while the Biblical understanding sees justice in terms of ?the right order of things and fulfillment of the just demands of relationships.?

As it does each morning, the synod opened today with a brief prayer service. The custom is for the bishops to take turns delivering a brief spiritual meditation, and this morning a special bishop indeed kicked things off: Pope Benedict XVI, who delivered an impromptu reflection in Italian lasting almost twenty minutes.

Seated at the center of the dais in the synod hall, and struggling with a hoarse throat for much of his talk, Benedict XVI told the bishops that while it?s important ?to know the empirical reality? of Africa today, that sort of ?horizontal analysis? isn?t enough.

?Our first relationship, the foundational relationship, is with God,? Benedict said. ?At the bottom of injustice and corruption is a heart that?s not right, that?s closed to God.?

?If our relationship with God isn?t correct, all the rest isn?t correctable,? the pope said. ?When we talk about development, we must also talk about this interior development.?

Benedict thus urged the bishops to ensure that their primary concern is to ?testify to the goodness of God? and to ?evangelize.?

By presenting the ?universal and concrete? character of Christian charity, Benedict XVI said, the church in Africa can help the continent overcome its divisions based on ?tribe, ethnicity and religion.?

There are 244 bishops taking part in the Synod for Africa, which includes 33 cardinals, 79 archbishops and 156 bishops. Of that number, 197 are Africans, and the rest represent countries that either have important populations of people of African descent, or countries that provide significant assistance to the church in Africa.

All African cardinals, all presidents of African bishops? conferences, and the heads of the Eastern rite Ethiopian and Coptic churches are all ex-officio members of the synod. The other members were either elected by their bishops? conference, or appointed directly by the pope.

There are also 29 ?experts? and 49 ?auditors? ? a mixture of both clergy and laity, men and women ? as well as six delegates representing other Christian churches.

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