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Africa is no longer the 'Beggar of the World'

Andrea Riccardi | Oct. 5, 2009 NCR Today

The Community of Sant?Egidio, founded in Rome in 1968 and considered one of the new movements in the Catholic church, has long has a special commitment to Africa. The community helped negotiate the Mozambique peace accords, and its DREAM project is considered a model for anti-AIDS efforts. This morning, the founder of Sant?Egidio, Italian layman Andrea Riccardi, published an essay on the Synod for Africa in *Corriere della Sera*, Italy?s leading daily newspaper. Following is an *NCR* translation of Riccardi?s piece.

"The Church and the New Reality of Africa, No Longer the Beggar of the World"

By Andrea Riccardi

African priests, bishops must resist the temptations of 'power'

The Synod for Africa has begun. After the trip of Benedict XVI in Cameroon and Angola last March, the church now ponders the general conditions of the sick continent." Here, Catholicism has seen impressive growth in the 20th century.

The number of Catholics rose from less than two million in 1900 to more than 160 million today. The era of colonialism was an intense missionary season, but the church didn?t arrive on the continent in the wake of the colonial powers. Beginning in the 1950s it began to 'Africanize,' taking on an African face. It has known grave difficulties and persecutions, and not just for Catholics. The Orthodox Patriarch of Ethiopia, Paulos (who has been invited to the synod), knew the hard persecution of the dictator Menghistu, who threw him into jail and assassinated many religious.

In the 1990s, the church in Africa had a central role in the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Great figures among Catholics took their place from the beginning of independence, such as the Sengalese leader Senghor (one of the few leaders of his era who spontaneously relinquished his power) or President Nyerere in Tanzania.

And today? Catholicism is a transitional state, while continuing to be one of the great human resources of Africa. But in what sense?

The church is challenged by the vitality of Islam, which is sometimes radical. But it also faces an alternative Christian message: free churches, sects, which propose a ?hot,? sentimental Christianity, with emphasis on miracles. Benedict XVI spoke about the risks of ?religious fundamentalism, mixed with political and economic

interests ? Groups that have different religious affiliations,? he said yesterday, ?are spreading throughout the African continent. They do so in the name of God ? teaching and practicing not love and the respect of freedom, but intolerance and violence.?

The church feels the reduced numbers and the aging of Western missionaries. In Africa, the Catholic churches are always full, but in some countries Catholicism has a less central position than it once did, and it?s increasingly challenged by religious and cultural pluralism. These problems are clear to Benedict XVI, who, in this ?Year of the Priest?, looks with attention to the 34,000 African priests. Africa has young priests, courageous and generous, but sometimes tempted by the exercise of a clerical ?power.? One can?t generalize, but the style of power, typical of African society, can also infect bishops and priests. This situation has an impact upon Catholic laity. The great figures among the laity (Nyerere or Senghor) are now gone. The laity (and female religious), who are decisive for the life of the church, in Africa are often seen only as collaborators of the priests. One sees this in the absence of Catholics in many cases from the leadership classes. Can the African Synod give vitality to the church on the continent in all its components? Pope Ratzinger has proposed, not structural adjustments, but the ?highest measure of Christian life, which is holiness.?

The bishops must face the scenario of the wars, disease and poverty of the continent. But Africa isn?t entirely ?dark.? Despite the crises, it is returning to the center of global interest. One sees this, for example, in the policy of China. In a recent conference organized by the foundation of the Bank of Sicily, Africa was presented as a great opportunity for European business. Currently, 33 African nations are experiencing economic growth. There?s a young generation emerging, ready to exploit the opportunities of globalization, with a different cultural horizon from the traditional one. When talking about African culture it?s important to be careful, because a discussion of ?African authenticity? risks revealing itself as ideological and outdated. African culture today is far more modern than ethnic and traditional images based on folklore, whether they come from Europeans or Africans.

Understanding of Africa must become more sophisticated than the painful and simplified image from the time of the dictatorships. Society, which has become complex, is no longer naturally religious as is so often said. If large masses of people are still caught between the past and the future, many Africans have nevertheless taken an enormous step forward. Given how fast things are changing, perhaps the Catholic bishops should re-read the reality, not trusting in stereotypes, in order to better understand the world in which their faithful live. The pope has given an example, speaking strongly of the attractiveness of ?practical materialism.?

Grave situations of misery, war and sickness persist. Curing AIDS requires important resources, and African can?t do it alone. It needs help, investment, and insertion into the global network. Nonetheless, Africa also has much to give at every level. It?s not the beggar of the world. It?s noteworthy that, in the year of economic crisis, the church is putting Africa at the center: ?Africa represents an immense spiritual lung, for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope,? the pope said. But this lung can get sick. The Catholic bishops can?t merely administer a great spiritual patrimony, but they have to go deeper and take the risk of the path of the future.

Additional reports are here:

- t
- To bongos and bass guitar, pope calls Africa an 'immense spiritual lung' [1]
- t
- Africa is no longer the 'Beggar of the World' [2]
- t
- Africa?s dynamism real but also deceptive, cardinal says [3]

t

- Say hello to Africa's next great hope to be pope [4]

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/bongos-and-bass-guitar-pope-calls-africa-immense-spiritual-lung
[2] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/africa-no-longer-beggar-world
[3] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/africa%E2%80%99s-dynamism-real-also-deceptive-cardinal-says
[4] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/say-hello-africas-next-great-hope-be-pope
[5] http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today