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Synod leaders: Church needs to get its house in order

by John L. Allen Jr.



Choir members from Africa sing after Pope Benedict XVI celebrated the opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops for Africa in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 4. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Rome

Grappling with how Catholicism in Africa can be a force for reconciliation, justice and peace, a handful of African bishops seemed to suggest today that in the first place, the church needs to get its own house in order.

In effect, these prelates suggested, it will be difficult for the African church to preach what it's not seen to practice.

Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Tanzania, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), told the Synod for Africa this morning that "selfishness, greed for material wealth and ethnicity resulting in ethnic conflicts" are "destroying the spiritual, social and moral fabric of our societies."

That broad indictment, he said, may also apply in some cases to the church.

“There are allegations against some of our pastors being involved, either through omissions or even by direct commissions in these conflicts,” he said.

“In this synod, we must have the courage to denounce even against ourselves things like the misuse of the role and practice of authority, tribalism and ethnocentrism, [and] political partisanship of the religious leaders,” Pengo said.

The Synod for Africa is meeting Oct. 4-25 at the Vatican in Rome.

Among other remedies, Pengo called for a greater spirit of communion within SECAM. He noted that the African bishops had planned to hold a plenary assembly of SECAM in Rome prior to the Synod for Africa, but it had to be scrubbed due to a shortfall of roughly \$270,000 — in part, he said, because many member conferences didn’t honor their financial commitments.

Ironically, the theme of that SECAM plenary was to have been “Self-reliance: The Way Forward for the Church in Africa.”

Bishop Lucas Abadamloora, president of the bishops’ conference in Ghana, raised the problem of communion at another level: between African prelates and their brother bishops in Europe and the United States.

“Our experience of the church in Europe and America, and even by some of our brother bishops and priests, suggests that we are second class family members, or that we belong to a different church,” Abadamloora said.

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“The impression is created that we need them, but they do not need us,” he said. “Theory of fraternity and community is strong, but the practice is weak.”

Bishop Sithembele Sipuka of Umtata, South Africa, also suggested that the problem of racism infecting the broader society may not be entirely absent from the inner life of the church.

Sipuka’s text was not made immediately available, but a Vatican briefer read the relevant line to reporters this afternoon.

“There are also indications that students of other races, especially white students, do not feel at peace with black students” in church-run seminaries, he said.

Sipuka apparently also said that sometimes at the parish level, it can be difficult to persuade people of different races and ethnic backgrounds to cooperate, for example by attending pilgrimage destinations together or taking part jointly in ordination ceremonies.

“The church must bring out a way of life based on reconciliation,” he said.

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