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Without even showing up, Obama's a force at African Synod

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 7, 2009 NCR Today

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tWhile almost 300 people are physically part of the current Synod for Africa, there?s at least one figure who?s managed to achieve a high profile without even showing up: U.S. President Barack Obama.

tSo far, various African bishops have hailed the election of the first African-American President in U.S. history as:

?tA potentially powerful new force for justice and good government across Africa;
?tA ?divine sign? of racial healing, in some ways a recapitulation of the Biblical story of Joseph;
?tA potential herald of further breakthroughs down the line, such as the election of a black pope.

tWhatever one makes of all this, it?s at least a different perspective than one often gets in Catholic circles in the United States, where attention is usually focused on Obama?s controversial stands on abortion and other life issues.

tTo be fair, with just one exception, the African prelates who have talked about Obama so far didn?t initiate the conversation. Instead, were responding to questions from reporters ? usually, truth to be told, American reporters looking for a storyline to bring the Synod for Africa home to readers in the States.

That said, the Africans certainly haven?t been shy about speaking their minds.

tThe first to do so was Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, the *relator*, or general secretary of the synod, in a Vatican news conference on Monday. Turkson called the election ?a sign that everybody in America ? has access to all the rights and privileges of the country.? Given that America preaches democracy internationally, he said, the election of an African-American ?shouldn?t be a surprise.?

tTurkson also suggested that Obama?s presidency, in tandem with the precedent of Kofi Annan serving as secretary general of the United Nations, shows that all leadership roles on the world stage are now open to people of color ? leading him to rhetorically ask ?why not?? on the prospects for a black pope.

tNext up came Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who in a synod speech on Monday called Obama?s election a ?divine sign? and a ?sign from the Holy Spirit,? suggesting that in God?s plan for salvation history, five centuries of the slave trade and of racial animosity might finally be giving way to a period of reconciliation.

tMonsengwo, it should be noted, brought up Obama on his own, rather than being cajoled into it by journalists.

tToday, four African prelates met with a group of reporters, and once again Obama was the first topic out of the gate. (In the interests of full disclosure, I should add that?s because I brought it up.)

tThe four prelates were Archbishop Gabriel Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana; Archbishop Simon Ntamwana of Gitega, Burundi; Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria; and Auxiliary Bishop William Avenya of Makurdi, Nigeria.

tI asked the four bishops for a reaction to Monsengwo?s reading of Obama in terms of salvation history.

t?It?s almost like a Biblical story repeating itself,? Palmer-Buckle said, referring to Obama?s election. ?Joseph was sold by his own brothers into slavery in Egypt, and he went on to become basically the prime minister of the country. In the case of Obama, his ancestors weren?t sold, but his father wandered into America, where his son has gone on to become the country?s president.?
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t?We think God has his own reasons, that he really directs history,? Palmer-Buckle said, ?and therefore we don?t think a thing like that [Obama?s election] is just by chance. There must a divine plan behind it.?

t?We have to take hope? from Obama, Ntamwana said. ?Americans seemed very united behind Obama?s presidency, and so we have said okay, we are dealing with some very, very hard things in Africa, and so we can hope that something is possible for us too.?

t?Yesterday,? Ntamwana said, ?it would not have been so easy to believe that a black American could have been president of the United States.? He called Obama?s ascent a ?special blessing of the Lord,? expressing hope that it might set a precedent for resolving ?forty to fifty years of civil wars in different countries? in Africa.

tOnaiyekan, who has a reputation as one of the more outspoken church leaders in Africa, said he wasn?t so much interested in the providential logic behind Obama?s election as what it might mean in practice for his continent.

tIn the first place, Onaiyekan said, Obama?s example could help break the stranglehold that ethnicity and tribal loyalties often have on African politics.

t?It?s been said in Africa that a Luo can be elected as the president of America, but he can?t be the president of Kenya,? Onaiyekan said, referring to the Kenyan tribe to which Obama?s father belonged.

t?The political situation in Africa makes it impossible,? Onaiyekan said, but now Africa has seen that ?in American it [ethnicity] doesn?t matter.? He called that ?a big lesson for us,? that ?if someone is capable, they should be recognized.?

tOnaiyekan also argued that Obama is in a unique position to effect positive change in Africa.

t?He?s not just a black American, but really an African ? half African and half American,? Onaiyekan said. ?Certainly more than any white man, he has the authority to talk straight to our bad leaders, telling them that they?re messing up our continent.?

t?He has the right to think of Africa as his continent,? Onaiyekan said, saying that Obama could become a unique force for ?good governance.?

tAfter that initial round of commentary, I asked a follow-up question: ?You?ve spoken of Obama in fairly glowing terms,? I said, ?but are you aware that for your brother bishops in the United States, Obama is a controversial figure because of his positions on abortion and other issues??

t?We are definitely aware,? Palmer-Buckle said.

tIt?s important to remember, he said, that Obama ?didn?t run as a Catholic to be president. He was elected by all Americans.?

t?The church has the right to say what it thinks? when it clashes with Obama, Palmer-Buckle said, ?but it also has the duty to go and meet him, to see what are the things which unite us.?

tPalmer-Buckle compared such outreach to the late Pope John XXIII, when he met during the early 1960s with the son-in-law of then-Soviet Premier Nikita Kruschev. That act was widely seen as inaugurating the Vatican?s *Ostpolitik*, or outreach to the Soviet bloc.

t?We don?t have to sweep our differences under the carpet,? Palmer-Buckle, ?but they shouldn?t be the main thing.?

tPalmer-Buckle added that he was impressed by Obama?s recent commencement address at the University of Notre Dame.

t?The issue was how to make the world a better place, and [Obama] asked, why don?t we talk about it, put out cards on the table?? Palmer-Buckle said, suggesting that the church should take him up on the offer.

tFor his part, Onaiyekan objected to the premise of my question.

t?I don?t think we?re speaking in glowing terms about Obama,? he said. ?Who?s speaking in glowing terms??

t?It?s simply that in Africa, we are always happy when our brother is big!?

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