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A conversation with Archbishop Wilton Gregory

by John L. Allen Jr.

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Lone U.S. bishop at the Synod for Africa talks about the African experience in America, Barack Obama, health care reform, and the sex abuse crisis

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Rome

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, Georgia, is the lone U.S. bishop taking part in the Oct. 4-25 Synod for Africa in Rome. Gregory, 61, was the first African-American to be elected president of the U.S. bishops' conference, and he led the American church through the peak period of the sexual abuse crisis from 2001 to 2004. A Chicago native, he also knows a thing or two about politics, and therefore how to handicap the dynamics in a setting such as a synod of bishops.

Gregory sat down for an interview on Oct. 13 at the North American College, talking about the synod, the African experience in the United States (including the need to better prepare African priests for the realities of American parishes, such as their expectations about women in leadership roles), the future of ethnic parishes in America, Barack Obama, the role race played in reactions to his own presidency of the bishops' conference, health care reform, and the recent decision of the U.S. Supreme Court not to block the release of documents related to sex abuse charges in the Bridgeport, Connecticut, diocese.

The following is a complete transcript of that interview.



It must be nice to know that in this synod, you're not the star of the show.

Absolutely, yes. I want to remember that the focus here is, and should be, on the church in Africa.

I know you're here by papal appointment, but do you have any sense of why you?

In all candor, I don't. I know that there are a number of bishops in the conference whose personal experience in working with the episcopate in Africa is much greater than mine, both African-American as well as white bishops who have worked in Catholic Relief Services, on visitation trips with the international justice and peace committee, and so on. I know the Holy Father had a fairly large roster from which to choose. I'm not certain ? I'm privileged, I'm honored, but I don't have any key to say this is the reason [I'm here].

Neither Archbishop [Nikola] Eterovic nor anyone else from the synod has pulled you aside to explain it?

No, they haven't.

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What's struck you so far?

This is my third synod. I was in the synod in 2001, on the pastoral ministry of bishops, and the synod in 2005 on the Eucharist. So, I've had some experience with synod dynamics, but this is the first one that's a regional synod for me. In the first two, the dynamic was focused on the question: the pastoral office of the bishop and the Eucharist. That's typical of ordinary synods. The diversity therefore comes from the perspectives of the various bishops representing the whole church, the church universal.

In this one, the dynamic's different, because the focus is on the place. The diversity comes from the particular issues that bishops from Africa choose to focus on, whether it be the political, the environmental, the social, the local/ecclesial ? that's a little different. It's very interesting for me, because obviously as you listen to the different bishops, they want to highlight a particular point that they, from their own perspective, feel is important. It's also a revelation of the great diversity of the church in Africa. I think we Americans have a tendency to look at Africa as this landmass that's the same from the West Coast to the East Coast, and from North to South. What I'm hearing is that depending on where you live, you've got different issues. There are some common themes, to be sure, but the diversity has been striking.

My favorite example was the bishop from Botswana, who said in effect, "We're a middle class country that isn't generating immigrants, we're struggling to accommodate immigrants who are arriving from other places, and my big concern is xenophobia." It was the kind of speech a European or American might have given.

Exactly. Of course, there's also the diversity of the church north of the Sahara and south of the Sahara. The church in northern Africa is an extraordinary minority, living in a largely Islamic world, with its own particular context. Meanwhile the church south of the Sahara is growing rapidly. It has an Islamic presence too, and it also has within its territory great natural resources – it seems to me the people there have in their natural resources the capacity to make life a lot more prosperous and livable for the entire population, but factors have rendered that just impossible in some places.

Would you say the value of this experience, for you, is more what you learn than anything specific the synod will produce?

Clearly. I sit at the table with the other bishops, the vast majority of whom are from Africa, and I'm hearing about the life of a wide variety of people. I'm just kind of marveling at their faith, their resilience, their hope, their frustrations – it's a learning experience.

Had you known most of these bishops before?

I knew a good number of them. I knew several of them through my experience as president of the conference. I went to Africa in 2001. I was not yet the president, but the bishops of Sudan had invited the president then, who was [Archbishop Joseph] Fiorenza [of Galveston-Houston], to meet with them. They wanted to share with the church in the United States some of the needs they had and the social and political struggles they were going through. Because of the hostile environment in Sudan, we met in Kenya. That was typical, because the Sudanese bishops would often come into Kenya to have their regular episcopal meetings.

That was back when we thought Kenya was an oasis of stability.

Yes, although in 2001, it was that spring in which the American embassy in Kenya had been bombed. I went there, met the bishops of Sudan, and then we went into Uganda on that same trip. The bishop of Fort Portal at the time was the president of the Ugandan bishops' conference, and he had invited me and Monsignor Bill Fay, who was my travelling companion as the then-general secretary [of the conference]. We went into Kampala and we flew from Kampala to Kasese, which was where the airport was, and they took us into Fort Portal, where we met a number of bishops.

I know Archbishop [John] Onaiyekan, from Abuja in Nigeria – of course, everyone knows Onaiyekan! I know Archbishop [Gabriel] Palmer-Buckle [of Ghana]. He has a number of relatives in Atlanta, by the way – he has, I think, two brothers in Atlanta and a sister, so he has come back and forth to Atlanta to visit his family. We also received the pallium together in 2005, when he received it for Accra and I received it for Atlanta. There are friendships there. I also know Archbishop Jorge Jiménez of Cartagena [Colombia], who is also a papal appointee, because when I was the president of the U.S. bishops' conference, he was the president of CELAM [the Latin American bishops' conference]. There are friendships that exist, but I'm getting to know them better.

You're a synod veteran. Can you put your finger on two or three main themes you see percolating in this synod?

One of the things, I think, that will surface is the need for the bishops to speak strongly in favor of governmental stability and against the corruption that is too rampant in too many countries. As an American, I was sitting there and listening to a number of bishops who talked about the political instability and the challenge that the people in many countries face when an election occurs, and it just destabilizes the country. It's not a change in political power, it's something that makes the country unstable. I remember our own experience as Americans in 2000, when the results of the election were so delayed because of the vote counts and so on ? hanging chads and all that. In spite of the frustration that we felt, I can't recall anyone seriously concerned about the stability of the government. Whereas in so many of these countries, the questions are: Will the army seize control? Will the outgoing government willingly turn over the reins of authority to the new government? Will there be violence against the candidate who won? Will the candidate who lost be banned? That's just not part of our political horizon. I think that will be one theme.

Certainly the AIDS pandemic is another. That is a looming concern over so many countries there. I think that we will somehow reaffirm the church's assistance to those who suffer. Irrespective of the moral issues that are out there, the de facto reality is that the Catholic church is providing a huge, huge percentage of the medical, personal, and familial support of the people affected by that pandemic.

I think it's interesting that the role of women in African societies has repeatedly come up.

Not just in society, but in the church too.

Sure, because it's part of society. The role of women has received considerable consideration.

I also think the issue of the self-sufficiency of the local church [is a key theme]. These African churches really want to be self-sufficient. They realize that ultimately they must become self-sufficient. At this point, however, they still need to continuing support of the church throughout the world. I think the synod may very well make a statement about the commitment of the universal church to Africa. I think those are some of the key things that will be highlighted.

One thing you didn't mention which has come up a great deal that many African bishops have for the fate of their immigrants in the West. In the United States, we have a large and growing African diaspora. The Census Bureau puts it at a million, some community activists put it between two and three million, but in any event it's a large population. From a pastoral point of view, are we doing enough to welcome these new African migrants and to meet their needs?

The simple answer is, no. I think, like any community receiving a growing number of new people, we haven't been well prepared to receive them. I can speak personally in Atlanta, because we have a very large number of African immigrant peoples, both Anglophone and Francophone. Right now, I have a challenge to provide a Francophone priest. Obviously, the Francophone African population is large, but it's not the only French-speaking community there. We have a large Vietnamese community, but they're mostly being served in Vietnamese. But we have people coming from Haiti, for example, as well as a number of French people coming from France itself. Of course, I'm responsible for them.

One challenge I know many bishops face where there are large groups of African immigrants is how to handle the ethnicity question. For example, if you have a large Nigerian group that's mostly Ibo, do you give them an Ibo priest who can minister in Ibo, thereby perhaps excluding all the non-Ibos? What's your approach?

At this point, the Nigerian community is largely Ibo, because that's traditionally where the Catholics have

come from. But I also have Yoruba and so on, Nigerians who are not Ibo. They have settled in to a Nigerian community, even though there's great diversity within it. The Nigerians come together for social events, but otherwise they're pretty much dispersed into the parishes where they live. Many of them, of course, professional business people.

Was that a conscious choice on your part, or was that just how it happened?

That's how it happened. It was that way when I arrived.

I have a number of [African] priests who were ordained for Atlanta and who are assigned to parishes. They make contact with the African community. The two I think of right away are Ibo. One works in our tribunal, and one was just transferred to one of our suburban parishes. There is an affinity. I haven't had to face that exact question.

Do you think it's important to design pastoral care with the goal of integrating immigrants into the broader church community, as opposed to keeping them separate?

I think that the language issue is a factor. If an immigrant community really needs to be served in the native language that they speak, which is not English, then we have to make an accommodation. But many of the African immigrants, even those who are Francophone by background, speak English. That changes the dynamic. It's different than a Korean community that really needs to be served in the language, because especially the adult generation, the grandparents, doesn't speak English.

Of course, what I'm really asking is this: In the 21st century, we are becoming again in some ways what we were in the 19th century, meaning a church of immigrants. Are we going to rebuild a system of ethnic parishes, or is that something you think we should avoid?

I think that's still an open question. I talk about that question with my priests' council. We have a number of language-based parishes. We have a huge number of Hispanic communities, we have two Vietnamese communities, one Korean community and one Korean mission. Because of the specific language needs, those situations have to be attended to. We have a Portuguese community, but it's in two different places. We have a Portuguese-speaking priest who serves both of them. It's not an independent Portuguese-speaking parish.

Look, I grew up in Chicago. I know the dynamic of what was going on, at least historically. Right now in the archdiocese of Atlanta ? I can't speak for other places ? we have not, as a rule, gone the ethnic parish route. We've provided missions, because we have to provide missions, but we anticipate that in one or two generations they'll become part of the broader community.

Already, of the 95 parishes and missions, I would say that right now, sixty of them would have some services in Spanish. It may just be a Sunday Mass, it may be Mass and sacramental preparations, it may be Mass and catechesis. The Hispanic community is everywhere. A good number of the other language groups are dispersed.

In many places, the practice of the future will likely be not to ask how many Masses you have in Spanish, but how many in English.

In some places, that will clearly be the case.

In your speech at the synod, you said that African immigrants can help us ?rediscover our own spiritual traditions that so often are set aside because of the influence of our secular pursuits.? Is there evidence that?s happening, or more commonly are the Africans becoming secularized?

It?s a give and take reality. For example, a lot of the people settling in the archdiocese bring their cultural, religious festivals. The Brazilians want to celebrate Our Lady of Aparecida, many of the Vietnamese want Our Lady of Lavang. What happens is that when they are in other parishes and they have these festivals, they invite the other communities. One of our most spectacular communities is St. Philip Benizi, which is a parish on the south side that has a huge diverse community. They have an international festival, when all of the people bring all of their foods, and they have a big Mass when all of the people come in their native garb. What happens is that the Anglos kind of like it because they see the great diversity, and then of course many of them say, ?Oh yeah, we?re Irish,? and they bring out St. Patrick. What it does is, when it?s done well, and I must say that St. Philip Benizi does it very well ? it?s not the only parish that does it well, but it?s the one I?m thinking of ? what they do is, they kind of reinvigorate a sense of their heritage, their prayers, the devotions that once marked their community.

Pope John Paul II?s great dream after the fall of the Berlin Wall was that the faithful of Eastern Europe, who had paid in blood the keep the faith alive, would reinvigorate the secularized West. In fact, it seems to have worked more the opposite way ? that is, that secular Western values have spread to the East. Do you have any reason to believe that African religiosity will survive contact with the West to any greater degree?

We?re still at the first generation, so we don?t know yet. I do want to make this remark. When I was president of the conference, I was invited to go to a Marian day celebration in Hannibal, Missouri. It?s like a family party for the Vietnamese, and they come in great, great numbers. We?re taking 30,000-40,000 people. As you ask your question, I remember the scene. The young people, the teenagers, would be at the celebrations, whether it be the great Marian procession or the prayers, and at the Eucharist, and then in the evening they put on their jeans and they were dancing to American tunes. That?s what?s happening, which is that they really belong to two worlds. They belong to the world of their ethnic and cultural heritage, but they go to school with American kids and they watch American movies and all that. So, the next generation ? that?s the telling point.

You think it?s at least possible that next generation could act as a spiritual leaven in mainstream American society?

I would hope so. Now, it?s the hope of a pastor who would like to see the cultural and the spiritual heritage of people remain a part of who they are, part of their pride. That?s a struggle. For example, I know that in the Korean community in the archdiocese, many of the parents want their kids to learn their prayers in Korean. Part of that is a desire to hold on to their cultural heritage, which is wrapped up in their faith. In the sacrament of confirmation, when I?m in one of those parishes where there is a large ethnic or immigrant community, I?ll ask the kids, ?Do you have a favorite prayer?? You know, they?re scared to death that I?m going to ask them to say it. Then I?ll ask, ?Did you learn that first in Korean or in English?? A lot of them will say they learned it first in Korean, because Grandma and Grandpa taught it to them. As they grow older, they will distance themselves from some of the language simply because that?s the world they live in.

So it?s too early to know how much of that native religiosity will survive contact with the West?

It?s too early to know.

What's your sense of the experience of African priests serving in American parishes?

I think the jury's still out. Some, obviously, have adapted very, very well. I have said, and I really do believe, that the biggest challenge of any international priest, whether he's from Africa, Vietnam, Korea ? the biggest challenge is not language, it's culture. In other words, their experience of parish life, their expectation of priestly ministry, is certainly grounded in the culture that they came from. So, if you have a young African priest with all the zeal that God could give him serving in a parish in a suburban community in Atlanta, or Chicago, or Philadelphia, the image of being a good parish priest is going to be the one from his past.

It's up to us to help him see that: a) Women are critical to American parishes, and they are critical not just in a subservient way but in a leadership way. They are professional people with high degrees of academic competence and professional experience, and they're in leadership. b) American parishes like to balance their sacramental and catechetical needs with the social needs, so they want their priests at the Knights of Columbus pancake breakfast, they want the priest to come to the parish school pageant, they want their priest to stand outside and greet all the people, they want their priest to be visible with them. Some of our international priests are accustomed to keeping hours. They'll do anything you ask, they are among the most generous people I know, but their experience of being priests is not that kind of personal, first-hand involvement with laity who are as educated, if not more educated, than they are. It's up to us to help them.

I'm sure you've heard the conversation about Barack Obama in and around the synod. What are your thoughts about how positively your brother bishops in Africa are reacting to Obama?

I'm not surprised. I'm old enough to remember, though not with the wisdom of an adult, how the Irish felt when John Kennedy was elected president. There was a tremendous outpouring of pride that one of the sons of Eire had been elected president. I think it's similar. There's just a natural pride that someone from our heritage, our culture, our background, is now in the most prestigious political office in the world.

What strikes me is that the African bishops for the most part are reacting to Obama as a symbol, and at the level of symbolism, he is obviously a source of hope for lots of people. The bishops in the States, however, don't have the luxury of reacting to the president solely as a symbol. You also have to take into account his concrete policies, which obviously makes for a different kind of reaction. Do you think that's fair to say?

Yes, it is. And, our history is present. We have not yet figured out, how do you criticize an African-American president and not be considered a racist?

Who's the 'we' in that sentence?

I think, the American people. It's all of us. How do you disagree with a man's policy and not be accused of attacking him because of his race? His thoughts, his programs, his policies ? the issue of racism is always there. While we have taken a giant step forward in electing an African-American, it [racism] is still pretty close to the surface.

You presided over the bishops' conference at an enormously controversial moment, and you drew a fair bit of criticism. Were you ever tempted to interpret that criticism in racial terms, and do you think some of it was racial?

John, as you recall, I was elected president in mid-November 2001. On January 6, 2002, was when the first Boston Globe story [on the sex abuse crisis] appeared. Up until that point, the focus from the media

was, isn't this unusual, that the bishops have elected an African-American who also happens to be a convert? They were doing the double-whammy stories. Then Jan. 6 occurs, and it was no longer an issue.

Now, was some of the criticism of some of the things that I did grounded in race? I suspect so. But the intensity was such that it would have been inappropriate for me to interpret some of the criticism as based solely on race.

Let me flip the question around: Do you have the impression that there were some people in the Catholic world who were hesitant to criticize you because of your race?

I suspect there was a dance, a gentle dance, going on. But the issue [of the sex abuse crisis] was so overwhelming ...

That your personality faded fairly quickly?

Yeah, exactly.

Two questions about the American scene. First, the Senate Finance Committee voted today on health care reform. The U.S. bishops have put out a statement indicating that they may have to oppose reform unless three conditions are met: no mandated coverage of abortion; no punitive approach to immigrants; and wider access, especially for the poor. How optimistic are you that you will eventually get a bill the bishops can support?

I think we will have a bill, I really do. I think there's enough energy behind this thing. I hope we get a bill that respects conscience, so that no matter what is eventually written into law, the conscience of people will be respected. Doctors and medical workers should not be forced to do something that's contrary to their conscience. I hope that we can negotiate in the best possible way so that abortion is not a centerpiece of this bill. I hope the bill will respect the needs of those are immigrants. I'm not so foolish as to say that they'll be factored in, but I don't want them to be targeted ?

Thrown under the bus?

That's right.

I'm a Chicagoan by birth. I know that a lot of the fine points are never finalized until the twelfth hour, but I'm hopeful that it will happen.

The bishops are not looking for reasons to oppose health care reform?

We're looking for reasons to support it. It's been part of our social agenda for years.

Finally, it appears that the files from the Bridgeport diocese are going to be opened, and we still have the federal grand jury in Los Angeles. Is it frustrating to you that eight years after the crisis first erupted, in some ways you still don't seem to have turned that mythical corner?

It breaks my heart that people are still suffering. It breaks my heart that people who were harmed by clergy, no matter how many years ago, are still bearing this pain. Obviously, many of them will bear it for the rest of their lives. It breaks my heart that clergy are still under this cloud. I think that the bishops of the United States have taken bold steps. I don't think there is another public institution in the world that has taken the public steps that the church in the United States has. Obviously, this is still a cloud that we live with, but I'm glad we did what we did. Some would say, "You had to." Still, I'm glad we had the

courage to do it.

Philosophically, where are you on the question of releasing documents? Would you have fought release the way Bridgeport did?

I'm not side-stepping the question, but I simply don't know all the dynamics that were there. It's hard for me to project on an issue that I only see from the outside.

From the inside, what has your own policy been?

My own policy, both in my former diocese and in my archdiocese here, is that we cooperate with the government. Fortunately, we haven't come to the juncture that Bridgeport has.

If somebody sued for access to the files, you'd cross that bridge when you came to it?

It would have to be [determined by] the circumstances ? I can't quarterback a game that has not yet been played!

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