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Hearing the cry of women at the African Synod

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tAs the Synod of Bishops for Africa reaches its midway point, its key themes seem to include empowering women (both in the broader society and the church), a perceived Western assault on the African family, globalization and it discontents (especially chronic poverty), and dialogue with Islam.

tThe fate of women, in particular, seems a major preoccupation.

t?The synod fathers have heard the cry of women,? said Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana yesterday, noting that cry ?has been echoed? by some of the women taking part in the African Synod itself.

t?Women need to be recognized in society as well as in the church as active members,? he said.

tTurkson, who is serving as the general secretary of the synod, yesterday delivered a speech technically known as the *relation post disceptationem*, or the ?report after the discussion.?

tIn essence, it?s Turkson?s job to sift through the almost 200 speeches given during the synod?s first few days, combined with the all the paperwork generated before and during the meeting, setting the table for the small groups which will craft proposals to be submitted to the full synod and, if approved, eventually to the pope.

tThe speech was keenly anticipated, not merely because it?s critical in shaping the final results of the synod, but also because Turkson, 61, is a rising star of the African church. He?s widely considered the front-runner to succeed Italian Cardinal Renato Martino as President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and he?s also touted by some as a potential papabile, or candidate to become pope one day.

tIn his presentation, Turkson laid out a few big ideas both *ad intra, meaning the internal life of the church, and ad extra, referring to broader social and political realities in Africa.*

***Ad Intra*: Inside the Church**

tKey notes struck by Turkson include:

?tGreater collaboration among bishops from Africa and other parts of the world, including stronger ties between SECAM, the African bishops? conference, and its equivalents in Asia (FABC) and Latin America (CELAM). Turkson also mentioned a desire for deeper ties with CCEE, the bishops? conference in Europe, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
?t?Insufficient appreciation for the role of women and youth.?
?t?The difficulty that some pastoral agents have in being faithful to their vows, vocations and states of life.?
?tRelationships between pastors and co-workers, and how church employees are treated.
?tThe need for ?in-depth evangelization,? designed in part to help Catholics withstand the appeal of traditional

religious practices such as witchcraft as well as new religious movements such as Pentecostalism.
?tOvercoming ethnic divisions inside the church: ?It is crucial to convince the Christian faithful that the fraternal bonds established by Christ through the waters of baptism and through his blood are stronger than blood ties,? Turkson said.
?tThe struggles of African clergy and religious sent abroad for either study or ministry. Specifically, Turkson alluded to ?the practice of young African girls sent to Europe to be trained in religious life, sometimes with a disappointing outcome: some refuse to return and end up in troubles,? he said.

***Ad Extra*: The Outside World**

tIn terms of broader social and political themes, Turkson mentioned:

?t?The fate of the family in Africa,? including what some African bishops have described as an ?assault? stemming from Western ?gender ideology? and NGOs such as Planned Parenthood.
?tEthnicity, especially as a catalyst for political division and armed conflict.
?tMigration, both on the continent itself and the growing number of African migrants in Europe and the United States.
?tGood governance, corruption and bribery.
?tUnjust trade conditions established by international bodies such as the World Trade Organization.
?tThe environment.
?tThreats to women, including genital mutilation, pornography, prostitution, violence and ?many kinds of humiliation in society.?
?tHIV/AIDs and other diseases ? ensuring, Turkson pointedly added, that the maladies of Africa ?receive the same attention as those of Europe.?
?tThe arms trade, including a call for closing the factories of arms manufacturers.
?tThe ?lust of some multinational corporations? in pillaging the natural resources of some African nations, and a call for creating ?an international judicial system? capable of holding those multi-nationals accountable.
?tDialogue with Islam, especially drawing upon the lived experience of the church in North Africa, where Muslims are the overwhelming majority. Turkson proposed that North Africa be part of the special synod on the Middle East that Pope Benedict XVI has announced for 2010, as well as a ?continental workshop? in Africa to exchange experiences on relations with Muslims.

Turkson then assigned a series of twenty-five questions for the small groups to ponder. Organized by language, the groups meet today and make reports to the full synod tomorrow. They?ll meet again on Friday, with an eye towards adopting a set of propositions for presentation to the pope next week.

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