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Ghanaian archbishop says church has failed Africa

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Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana (CNS file photo 2004)

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Here's an exercise to try sometime: Find any random cross-section of twenty people who know something about Catholicism in Africa, and ask them to tick off five names of the most impressive African bishops they know. The odds are fairly good that the name of Archbishop Charles ("Call me Charlie") Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, will surface with some frequency.

Palmer-Buckle, 59, is taking part in the Synod for Africa as a papal appointment. A leader in peace efforts in Ghana and a veteran of the international Catholic scene through his work with groups such as Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Relief Services, Palmer-Buckle is widely considered to be among the heavyweights of his generation in the African hierarchy.

He sat down for an interview with NCR on Wednesday, over lunch in a restaurant near the Vatican. Palmer-Buckle is known for both candor and good humor, and both were on display as the conversation ranged across a wide range of topics: women in the church, tribalism in the appointment of African bishops, the surprisingly ferocious talk within the synod about a perceived "assault" on the family in Africa from Western NGOs (including Palmer-Buckle's claim that faulty condoms are being dumped on Africa), and the strong spirit of self-criticism percolating among the African bishops.

On that score, Palmer-Buckle pulls no punches; looking at an Africa in which practicing Catholics are often as guilty of corruption and violence as everybody else, he says simply, "We have failed."

Palmer-Buckle also put an intriguing proposal on the table: Instead of a synod of bishops, why not hold a "pastoral congress of the universal church," in which laity, especially women, would be full participants?

The following is a transcript of the conversation.

Can you list what's struck you as the big ideas from the synod so far?

tI would say we are touching the very sore spot of Africa, which is its need for reconciliation. It's going to be the

agenda for the next number of years in Africa. It's already begun. I myself was involved in Caritas, where we started talking about reconciliation in Africa as far back as 1996-97. It's now been taken up on the global level, with a special focus on Africa. I can see that it's going to be one of the apostolates in which the church will have to be involved. Reconciliation, in this sense, goes beyond the work for justice that the church is already doing.

tFirst of all, that reconciliation has to be individual, personal. How can I feel good about myself, in spite of myself, all the mistakes and all the rest of it? Then comes reconciliation not just as an individual, but as an African, accepting myself and my culture for what it is. What are the lights and the shadows? Our people need self-esteem and self-dignity, to know that they have something to contribute. I have to feel good not only in my skin, but where I come from, I need to experience all that as richness. Of course, we also have to admit what we have as weaknesses.

tThe next stage is to move onto the people with whom we live, who are divided by so many things, and learn how we can bring about unity, because there's strength in unity. That is going to be the most important thing ? more reconciliation even than justice.

Have you heard anything concrete by way of a new strategy or method to promote reconciliation?

Probably one of the more interesting things I heard came when one of the presenters said that a lot of the African bishops have had experience bringing about reconciliation, either in their diocese or in their country. Can we not create synergy, with a ?Council of Elders' who would be ready and available to bring their experience to bear wherever there is a crisis?

It would be modeled on the group of elders in South Africa founded by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela?

Exactly, yes. That's one of the ideas I found very enriching. I myself had the opportunity of sitting in Ghana on the National Reconciliation Commission, which was two and a half years of hard work. There was a lot of research into the causes of disaffection and division, including social difficulties, tribalism, all of which is exacerbated by politics and politicians. The question of how to help people get beyond that is now the most important thing.

Your point is that there's a wealth of experience among the bishops themselves that could be pooled and made available in a more deliberate way?

Yes, that's it.

Yesterday Cardinal [Peter] Turkson [of Ghana] said that the synod fathers "have heard the cry of women." What does that mean?

I must say that it's coming through even more strongly in the small groups. In the first place, this is a synod of bishops, and one has to admit that by its very nature, it has excluded not only women but laity in general. So the lay people who have been invited are now beginning to make an impact, and they would love to be a part of the synod. I'd like to believe that if Rome would evaluate the contribution of the auditors, the lay men and women and the rest, we might probably move from a synod of bishops into something more like a pastoral congress of the universal church.

In which laity would be full participants?

In the Code of Canon Law, where it's a pastoral congress, normally all categories of the church will have to take part. As long as it remains a synod of bishops, let's put it this way ? the rules and the regulations limit not just

the contributions of laity, but even the priests. I believe the cry of women is actually the cry of the laity as a whole.

Of course, what most speakers have been talking about isn't just a greater role for women in the synod, but in the church and in society.

They're asking something that's very, very relevant and right-on. I'm asking myself how we're going to implement that.

Good, because I was just about to put that very question to you.

Definitely, women constitute about 55 to 60 percent of African society. They constitute about 70 to 75 percent of the church, the people who actually show up and are there. Yet when it comes to the leadership, they are a negligible minority. How are we going to take them on board?

In the United States today, 25 percent of diocesan chancellors are women. Are there any women who hold that job in Africa?

African society has always been very, very patriarchal. Just look at politics in Ghana. In our last parliament, out of 230 parliamentarians, I think fifteen or so were women. In this current dispensation, it's less than ten. Why is it that they won't let women into power? It's because that system of patriarchy is still not open to the idea of complementarity. It hasn't been brought into the ordinary ways of life, nor, in many ways, into the church.

So there aren't any female diocesan chancellors in Africa?

No, not that I'm aware of.

Might that be one option to consider?

Yes, I think we have to.

Another idea that's come up is creating women's affairs offices in dioceses. Does that strike you as helpful?

In the government in Ghana, on the political scene, there's a ministry for women's affairs. Why not do it in the church? It's very relevant. We have been a bit oblivious to the role of women by thinking in the church that the religious sisters took it up, but in reality the religious sisters were only there to do auxiliary services.

That was Sr. Harry's point in the synod, that they want to do more than just cook and clean.

Exactly.

Her idea was that women religious ought to be members of church bodies such as parish councils. Do you agree?

Canon law stipulates that a parish council must be representative, so there's nothing against their being on them. If there's something that's blocked it, it's a male mentality that has kept women out.

I just finished a diocesan synod in Accra, and we made sure that every parish was represented by two people: one had to be male, the other female. When we had another meeting to discuss the synod findings, I insisted each parish have three delegates: one male, one female, one a young person. There were about 200 delegates at the synod, and about 45 percent of the people who attended were women. Of that 45 percent, quite a lot of them

were very young women.

[The need to hear women] is a fact from which we can't run away. The only thing is how to make it effective, not just as decorative. People say we want to be there, we want to be represented, but the tendency is to bring them in just as choreography. That's not it. Bring them because they're qualified, because they have something to contribute.

That's one of the things I'm finding difficult, even among the religious. I told the religious when I went to my first diocese, in Koforidua, that I was not going employ them simply because I must employ sisters. I would hire them because they're qualified. I didn't want them to come to wash the dishes or the altar cloths. I want to employ you in my office, but if I'm going to do that, you must be qualified. If I'm going to hire you to be in charge of religious education, you must be qualified, and I'm going to pay you a good salary for it. Initially, some of the sisters thought I was trying to get rid of them. Some of them had been washing clothes or taking care of altars of teaching catechism just because they were nuns. I told them, no, I want you to have the qualifications.

After about three or four years, some of the sisters woke up to the fact that we need qualifications, we need on-going formation, we need to go and study. So, I started to send some of them to go and study, which gave them self-esteem and dignity. When they came back and offered their service, they were doing so because they were qualified, not just because the bishop put them there. They could come up and say, ?My Lord bishop, this-and-that is what we have seen, this-and-that is what must be changed.' Now, the person in charge of education is a sister, because she's a qualified teacher. The person in charge of my finances, the second-in-command, was a sister, because she's a qualified person. I didn't just take them on because they're women. I don't believe in constituent assembly representation. I believe in finding professional qualified people.

For many bishops, they're asking themselves [about empowering women], how to do it? I would say, train them, in ways consistent with their background and interests, and then you can use them over a period of time. One problem with the religious, and this is a complaint from a number of bishops, is that you train them with the idea of getting five years of service. After two years, their superior comes to you and says, we need them. Then you ask, why waste my money training these people? We want to say, look, sisters, I'm going to give you training and you will work for me for five years. After that, you move on and let somebody else come in. That's the attitude: train them and let them be of service.

When it comes to professional work, such as finances and administration, they were very many lay women who are already well trained and very competent. If we can pay their salaries, let us use them.

Speaking of sending religious women abroad for training, Cardinal Turkson mentioned yesterday that at times those experiences haven't worked out very well because some of the religious women stayed abroad and "ran into problems." What do you think he had in mind?

To be honest with you, my experience has been more with priests who don't come back than with sisters. I'm more familiar with that. There are a few cases of sisters sent overseas who left religious life, because they went into environments where the emphasis was strongly on emancipation and feminist movements and so on, and they imbibed so much of it that they didn't continue in religious life. Those, however, are exceptions. I'm more worried about priests who stay away, because it's easier for them than for sisters. It's frankly easier for a priest, after his training, to find a better place to earn a living and stay abroad.

You don't hesitate to send sisters abroad?

It's only now that I'm in charge of a diocese that has a religious congregation of sisters, who are under my authority. I decide, together with their superiors, where they are going to go and what they are going to do. The

truth is that they decide, and I normally give my consent to it. I would say that I don't see any difficulty, because they're already made good arrangements. They have sisters who can go three years, four years, and come back. We're working hand in hand. They're in New York, also Brooklyn, a few of them are in Osh Kosh, Wisconsin, and some of them were in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit.

Ethnicity has come up a great deal, including ethnic divisions inside the church. Some bishops have talked about problems that can occur when a bishop is appointed from outside the dominant ethnic group in a given diocese, including resistance from his own priests. How common is that?

I would say that we began talking about inculturation, which then became ?Africanization.' Now, the concept of ?Africanization' has descended into a certain form of tribalization. It's a problem.

You mean certain groups feel, ?the bishop should be one of ours.'

Exactly. It comes from the fact that people haven't really understood the ecclesial nature of the church, the Catholic nature of the church. They easily bring the social context, the social underpinnings, into the church. There's an awareness, that's positive in my opinion, about a renaissance in African cultures and African awareness. But now it's running the risk of becoming a kind of Balkanization within the church, which is quite dangerous.

What are you doing about it?

When I look at the church in Ghana, we have now reached a state where we are nominating a generation of bishops that are not necessarily from the particular tribe of their area.

How are they being received?

One or two little difficulties here and there. For instance, I'll use myself as an example. My father was Ga, and that's the indigenous tribe localized in Accra. My mother is from Nzema country, near the Ivory Coast border, on the coast. Even though I was a priest in Accra before I became a bishop in Koforidua, which is part of Accra, when I was being transferred to become the Metropolitan Archbishop of Accra, some people wanted to say that I was not a Ga, and they didn't want a Fanti ? they thought I came from my mother's tribe. Whoever did that obviously did not know my ancestry, but this is to tell you that it's there. Whether it came from the church, or from political influence on the church, is another thing that we have to find out.

Is there an informal policy about the nomination of bishops from outside the dominant ethnic group?

I believe there's no written policy. The nuncio doesn't actually make the appointments, because he relies on what the bishops give him. We all, in the name of ?Africanization' and ?inculturation,' veered too far in the direction of ethnic preference without thinking of the consequences. It's only now we're beginning to realize that using that as a yardstick is certainly against the idea of being a ?catholic' church.

Is the pendulum today swinging toward naming bishops from outside the dominant ethnic group?

The policy should be to find the best guy, period. We bishops have a duty to start educating our priests and laity to know that we must transcend the confines of ethnicity in the choice of leadership. It has to be the guy who's best qualified, and we shouldn't see it through a tribal lens.

Some say that the hold of tribalism is weaker on younger Africans, especially those who live in cities.

I think that's normal. The young people are more exposed, they've travelled more, they're not trapped in their own little corner. They tend to be a little more cosmopolitan than the generation before. But very often, they're

misused by the older generation, especially to cause violence. They're the ones who are incited by the older generation to go and fight because this guy's from our tribe and that guy's from our tribe. They're doing it without having stopped to think seriously about why they should be involved.

There's been considerable talk about the family. Several bishops have described an insidious Western assault, linking it to NGOs. How much reality is there to that? Is there really a Western campaign to corrupt African values?

We don't only suspect that there is a campaign, we think it's deliberate. It's not necessarily ?Western,' but it's coming from the West, from a particular lobby that sees African values on the family to be a danger to what's called the ?new global ethic,' which is being propounded by the UN, by the World Bank, by the IMF, and even by the European Union.

By a ?global ethic,' you mean a liberal social agenda ? pro-abortion, pro-gay, etc.?

That is the new global ethic that's being talked about. Think about countries not being admitted to the European Union because they have not put into their constitution acceptance of gay unions as equal to marriage. That tells you there's something wrong. When you hear that Belgium decided to talk in parliament about the pope's comments on condoms [during his March trip to Africa], is that an issue for parliament? Can you imagine? Where is freedom of speech, of religious, of association? The pope is free to express his opinion. Why should a parliament make that a government issue? It's difficult for me not to believe that there's an agenda.

In Ghana, on the ground, do you see NGOs carrying this agenda forward?

Sure, yes. They're not only trying to influence parliament, but they're out there corrupting the young. I know of NGOs that are not only supplying condoms, they're also supplying lubricants for boys who want to engage in homosexual relations. I know it. They're handing them out, for free. I know workers for NGOs who hang around with boys in order to introduce them to homosexual relationships. In those cases, I don't want to believe it's the NGO's agenda, but the workers are letting their own tendencies go in as a normal thing to be accepted.

The idea is ?I'm okay, you're okay,' and they are pumping it down the throats of our people. For our people, with all due respect, the idea a lot of the time is that anything coming from Europe and America is better than what we have. There was a young girl working with an NGO who came to me and said, ?Archbishop, the church must speak out against these things. I work at this NGO and they ask us to go out there and supply condoms, lubricants, and the rest of it. When we ask them why, they tell us it's none of our business.' What's happening is against our culture, and nobody will convince me that there isn't a deliberate agenda.

What's the solution?

I am waiting for the synod to come to two conclusions. First, we need serious advocacy. We need to target those NGOs and those particular individuals, and tell whoever brought them in there that they're *persona non grata*. We must be ready to give proofs. I had a case of a guy who was doing things totally contrary to the teaching of the church, and he actually worked for a Catholic group. I told the other bishops, we have to move this guy out.

There's an overwhelming danger, especially because of the current vulnerability of our youth. They're supposed to be the ones who tomorrow will hold the flag of the family. Most of the young people are so vulnerable to these NGOs and what they are propounding. They want jobs, they want security, some of them want to travel out, some of them want to be identified with modern culture and the rest. They're the most gullible, and they're the ones who are to become the future of the African family. The risk is that they will have no values to uphold.

Polls show that in most African nations, the opposition to things like abortion and gay marriage is overwhelming. Is it possible that some of the talk of the influence of Western NGOs exaggerated?

To cry wolf, maybe you've got to exaggerate a bit to get people's attention. But there's no smoke without fire, and there's a fire. We've got to worry about that fire.

What would be the motive for these groups to try to subvert traditional African values?

This is where we believe the Western world has adopted the idea, ?I'm okay, you're okay.' Ironically, anything that challenges that idea isn't okay and must be battled. It not only must be battled, but extirpated.

I can't help but look at the fact that the pope comes to Africa and he talks about condoms as an issue. In the Catholic church, we offer three methods to help solve this problem of AIDS in Africa: "A", abstain; "B", be faithful; "C", chastity, which is in consonance with traditional African values. Those Planned Parenthood people, they're only talking about condoms. By the way, they know full well that the condoms devoted to Africa are sub-standard.

Many African bishops say that ? how do you know the condoms are sub-standard?

I'm ready to give you proof.

It's not just urban legend?

I know it for a fact. The condoms they bring are sub-standard, and there's no quality control. Some of these companies, Durex and the rest, are benefactors of groups such as the Planned Parenthood Federation. They don't check [these condoms], it's all for free, and they just bring it to Africa. The environmental conditions in Africa are such that those latex forms that the use in no time go rotten, or they have expired.

Because they sit on the docks too long?

Exactly, and people don't even know whether they have expired. In the final analysis, they're doing more harm than good.

Of course, a cynic might say you're supposed to be against using condoms under any circumstances. Isn't it a bit ironic for a Catholic bishop to complain that the condoms arriving in Africa aren't good enough?

Because we're concerned about our people. We're not worried about the condoms, we're worried about the people. It's injurious to the people.

Finally, let's talk about governance. Complaints about corruption, bribery, and so on, have come up a lot. Church leaders have been talking about those things for an awfully long time, without much apparent success. What makes you think this synod will change that track record?

I don't think we're going to change the track record yet. I think we are becoming aware of the fact that as a church, our Catholics have not been adequately prepared to be able to make choices in favor of Christ. Every country has said that wherever there was corruption, our Catholics were among the corrupt. Wherever there was civil war, our Catholics were among those who were instigating the violence. So, the church feels we have failed. We've not had a real social impact. I think we're going to go away from here concerned that we need to do more about our own faithful, our Catholics, particularly our Catholic politicians. We need to accompany them, particularly in terms of the church's social teaching.

You think the problem is that political leaders don't know the church's social teaching? At least at a rudimentary level, it's hard to imagine any African president doesn't know that the church is against

taking bribes ? which would suggest the problem isn't really with a lack of information, wouldn't it?

I think we're trying to look more into ourselves, where we have failed, than the leaders themselves. We as a church should know better.

Knowledge must not remain in the head, it must descend into the heart and it must move the limbs. I would say we're going to leave here convinced that we have evangelized them in the head, but we have not touched the heart. Christianity has not become a real way of life, it's always remained an intellectual choice of some sort. It's not on the intellectual level that we have been found wanting. We've been found wanting in the heart. The theme that Jesus Christ is our reconciliation, our justice and our peace, means that we will have to make sure that our Christians themselves are truly reconciled, and go out to bring about the message of Christ.

We as a church are going to go away from here more with work on our hands, than blaming others. We're not going to blame them. We're agreed that we have a lot more homework to do.

If the priority is formation, does that mean putting more emphasis on shaping good families, parishes, schools, and so on, and not so much on political activism and social justice advocacy?

I wouldn't make it an either/or. I would make it a both/and. I believe strongly that we need to lay better foundations, but the foundations must already be acting upon the situation before it gets out of hand. We're going to do our lobbying ourselves, our prophetic role of talking about what's wrong, we're going to go see the politicians and see where we can influence what's left. At the same time, we have to prepare people so that in the future the people themselves can be the ones to take decisions and take up that prophetic role.

You would agree that teaching a Catholic to pray the rosary, or to adore the Eucharist, to be a good parent and a good spouse, is itself a service to social justice?

It sure is. For example, it's a chance to teach them that if you go to the Holy Eucharist, and you take the body and the blood of Christ, that blood of Christ running in your veins should influence your choice when it comes to ethnicity. It should influence a general brotherhood, because that blood is thicker than tribal blood.

In the end, you're optimistic about the synod?

I was very happy to experience what would formally be called ecclesial communion and solidarity. There are bishops from the United States, from Latin America, from Australia, from Asia and Europe, and from other parts of the world. All of them have made it clear that we have the same problems, to different degrees, and therefore we must work together.

All of them made it clear that we're here to listen to what are the real problems on the ground, so that when we approach them, they know why we're asking for this or for that. We're not just interested in ?solidarity' in the sense of money and support, but also, for instance, lobbying. We might ask the American bishops to approach an American mining firm that's causing mayhem in Ghana. We might ask the Australian bishops to talk to an Australian firm that's causing an ecological disaster in Ghana. It's more meaningful because they know it, they've heard it. I believe that when we leave here, this ecclesial solidarity will be moved onto a more activist plane, a lobbying kind of plane.

Apart from that, most of the bishops are amazed at the vitality of the African church, the vocations that are coming up and so forth. What we would say is, why don't you help us train the priests and you can have some of them to take care of your parishes if you don't have seminarians? I'm looking at the case where we have seminaries in Ghana, and sometimes our professors are less qualified. Europe has them, American has them ? so give us professors, take care of their financial commitments and so on. Then we can train our priests, and some

of them can come and work for you. Or, maybe we can move to another plane where we can send some of our seminarians to Germany, to Ireland, to England, to America ? train them, keep some, and send the rest back to us.

Keep ten percent, and we'll take the rest?

My hope is that it will get to a point where there is real communion and solidarity. For me, this is a moment of kairos, it's a moment of grace. I'm not here only worried about the woes of Africa. This synod gives me the impression of a family that sits to look at their teenage son or daughter, who is full of idealism, creativity, energy ? full of life. But if we do not help this child to grow and mature properly, this energy can become destructive. They're here to help us to look at what we have as potential, and how to direct that potential for the greater good, not only of Africa but the entire church. I see the problems more as challenges, as opportunities for the whole church. I think each of the regional synods will take on a more universal character, I see it coming. ? I'm an inveterate optimist.

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