

Vatican's justice-peace head says what he thinks

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 15, 2010



Cardinal Peter Turkson of Cape Coast, Ghana, center, talks with other participants of the Synod of Bishops for Africa at the Vatican Oct. 6. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana was named the new president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in late October, just as his debut on the global Catholic stage as the *relator*, or general secretary, of the Synod for Africa ended. It was in some ways a baptism by fire for the 61-year-old Ghanaian prelate, introducing him among other things to the press climate in Rome. A few fairly innocent comments from Turkson about condoms, and about the prospect of a black pope, briefly became a cause célèbre in the Italian papers and prompted the Vatican to issue a swift "clarification."

As Turkson now puts it, he was forced to realize that in conversation he may say things with a smile, but in print "the smile never comes across."

Still, Turkson said he doesn't want "circumspection" to get in the way of saying what he thinks. He'd rather speak the truth, he said, and run the risk of being misunderstood.

In a Feb. 12 interview with *NCR* at his Vatican office (delayed by a couple of hours because of a rare Roman snowstorm that morning), Turkson displayed precisely such a willingness to take risks. On the environment, he rejected complaints that the Vatican, and Pope Benedict XVI, have been naïve in buying into global warming and climate change, saying that for a guy whose island is now under water or a farmer who doesn't know when to plant crops, "this isn't hysteria." On immigration, he bluntly said that Europeans "can't have their cake and eat it too," complaining about new arrivals but refusing to have children of their own.

Turkson also said that he wouldn't want to be the first black pope, because that figure will almost certainly have a "rough time."

The following is a transcript of Turkson's interview with *NCR*, conducted in English.

You came into this job shortly after Benedict XVI published his encyclical on the economy, *Caritas in Veritate*. The document was widely praised, even on the editorial pages of secular newspapers, but can you point to any concrete result from it? Or is too soon?

Maybe it's too soon. Having served on a few Vatican commissions before, commissions for dialogue and so on, I know that the problem of reception is always a big challenge. You can produce a document, but it's very important how it's received. Judging from the reception this encyclical has received, the publicity it generated ? some even referred to it as a "best-seller" ? I would say that's been very positive. Even if people don't agree with all the analysis and the conclusions drawn, the fact that they want to take it up and look at it, even if it's to disagree, is a good sign. People are reacting to the encyclical's insights, on development, on relationships among the different economic partners, support for poor countries, and so on. I find all of that very positive.

Do you see governments or international agencies taking the encyclical into consideration in the way they make decisions?

I probably wouldn't say that they're making decisions directly because of the encyclical. In secular governments, it's not likely that someone is going to say 'because of x or y in the pope's encyclical, we're doing this.' It's likely that their discussions may be influenced or inspired by it, however.

Do you believe that has actually happened?

This encyclical came out last summer, so in the life of an encyclical it's kind of too soon to say. What we can say, on the basis of media discussion and so on, is that it has certainly started people talking. The other day, for example, I got an invitation from DePaul University in Chicago, and they want to do some kind of a study on the encyclical and different traditions. I noticed that even the Chicago Tribune at one point did a column comparing the pope's positions and Obama's positions! So, just on the basis of the attention it got, it's a success.

Will you go to the event at DePaul?

Yes, I intend to go.

I think this encyclical, or other encyclicals, need to be read in a certain context, which is who the pope is. He doesn't pretend to be another world leader, and when he speaks he's not speaking like an ambassador making a speech at the United Nations. He's speaking as a religious leader, to other people who belong to that religion and to those who don't but who may be sympathetic to his values. That has to be clear, because it helps us to appreciate the point of departure. He's playing a prophetic role. He's not looking for one hundred percent agreement, or swift implementation by the governments of the world. He is offering something that he feels deeply within himself in to be a matter of truth.

The other major social document that has come out since you arrived is the pope's message for the World Day of Peace, which was dedicated to the environment. Some people have charged that the pope and the Vatican have been naïve in embracing the environmental movement, even though in some forms it advocates population control and even shades off into pantheism or a denial of the unique moral and spiritual status of the human person. Are you worried that the church's position could be misunderstood?

That's precisely the point, it would be a misunderstanding if it were understood as supporting pantheism or an environmental view that was for birth control. It's clear the church is not moving in that direction.

Coming from Africa, I could quote for you several traditional taboos we have, rooted in animistic religious beliefs, which have environmental concerns as their scope. For example, everybody knows how important it is to protect the headwaters of streams. You protect them by allowing vegetation to grow, to provide shade and cover. In my type of society in the past, there's likely to be a story which is told to prevent people from felling trees in that part of the region. The objective is clear, to protect the headwaters, but the story will not say anything about protecting the headwaters, even though its effect is to prevent anyone from doing anything like

that there because the life of the whole community depends on that stream. It protects the area from degradation and deforestation, even if the story itself reflects animistic and pantheistic beliefs. At least in Ghana, there were the aims of the stories and legends we have.

So we can accept the conclusion, even if we don't accept the mythic basis in which it's expressed?

It's not so much that we accept the conclusion. The church can independently observe developments on the surface of the earth, developments in culture and society, and draw its own conclusions. If they coincide with the conclusions drawn by other people from other points of departure, so be it ? we can work together. It's not that we come from the same premise. The premise of the church may well be different from the premises and points of departure of other groups.

To be honest, it's difficult for me to see how anyone could have a problem with the pope asking us to develop a sense of solidarity between ourselves, other users of the earth's resources, and future users still to come. That's inter-generational solidarity, and it's a very true and real need. Coming from Ghana, we are now struggling with some mining communities who are doing pit mines, and where they've discovered streams of gold, cutting through forest reserves. They're asking for the right to go into those areas, so we cannot but think this way [about environmental impact]. What are our responsibilities to those who are coming after us? If we allow our forests to disappear because of our search for gold, what will the generations who come after us have? The inter-generational concern is there, as is solidarity with the other users of the land. Taking the same example again, the mining companies want to drive out the communities living in the area so they can mine. This is insensitivity to other users of the land. They claim they're bringing jobs, but the maximum they usually employ is a couple of young people from the village because they're probably people without skills. But if the forest were left as it is, a poor woman without education still could go to farm and grow some crops. Even if it's just a tube of kasava, that would still enable her to feed herself and her family. You can't just give jobs to five people and claim you've brought jobs to the area.

Obviously, being concerned with that is not the same thing as pantheism or advocating birth control.

No, of course not. That's why I would hardly call the church's teaching on the environment 'naïve.' At least from my experience of where I come from, it speaks to the real world, to real-life situations.

What about climate change? Some critics, including some in the church, say the Vatican has more or less bought into what they see as a global warming myth, as hysteria.

Believe me, I know about hoaxes. A week or so ago in Ghana, somebody started a rumor that there was going to be an earthquake. Because people recall Haiti, they spent their nights in open places or on the beaches, so they wouldn't be crushed. Of course, there wasn't going to be any earthquake.

Could climate change be that kind of hysteria? Maybe. The other day I attended a meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and somebody came close to suggesting that all this is part of a cycle. We had the age of the glaciers, and today's warming is part of the same cycle, so we've gone through this before. Maybe, but for the guy who lives in Papua New Guinea or someplace, whose island is now under water, whose fields where he used to feed and grow is now under water, this isn't hysterical. The land upon which he used to live has disappeared. The water level has risen, and that island has disappeared. That's not hysteria, it's a real threat to life.

For example, in Ghana and several tropical African countries, the weather cycle has changed so much that farmers can no longer predict when to sow and when not to sow. As a result, the harvests are poor, and that's not hysteria either. For some, [climate change] isn't just a theory, it's a real experience.

You've spoken often in defense of immigrants, as has Benedict XVI and other Vatican officials. There's talk in the United States about immigration reform, though so far nothing has happened. Would it be

important for the rest of the world if the U.S. were to adopt serious immigration reform?

It would all depend on the content of this reform policy. Calling something a 'reform' doesn't tell you much about what it contains ? it's almost like this 'equality bill' in the parliament in England. I can't really react until I see what's in it. If, for example, a reform would put new limits on immigration or target who comes and who goes, then there would be something to address.

I know that immigration is delicate. Even though it's hardly a new phenomenon, today it is increasingly being seen as a threat. It's perceived as potentially ending a style of life in certain countries that people are used to. It's also seen as creating insecurity, unsafe conditions, or even being terroristic in character. Immigrants are often seen through the labels which are slapped on them. We forget that when professors and talented intellectuals are encouraged to emigrate, that's also an immigration issue, but it doesn't draw anything like the same reaction.

Have you been surprised by some of the anti-immigrant rhetoric in Europe?

Yes, I have. Of course, I'm not a European, and I probably may not be able to feel as they feel, but I think this is likely to be the position of people who feel their culture and way of life is threatened by droves of new people coming in. The basic reality is that there's no way at present to ensure an increase in the native population because the demographic index in Europe is falling woefully below replacement level. It's a phenomenon for which nobody seems to be able to identify real solutions, so it always gets people alarmed. That's what I think is happening. The population rate has fallen so low, and so when you see other groups that are growing, you start to worry, 'Will there be Italy tomorrow? What will Italy tomorrow look like?' Are we going to have Italo-Turks, Italo-Arabs, Italo-Africans, or whatever? That's the concern. In the past, when demographic supremacy was ensured for Europe, the arrival of foreigners wasn't a theme of big concern. Now it's becoming a concern because of the demographic imbalance.

Can the church help calm those fears?

The church can calm fears only if people listen. The church has been calling for a change in attitudes and lifestyles for a long time. Look, Europe can't have its cake and eat it too. You can't have a population that's unwilling to bring forth children, because you want to be comfortable and have your vacation and so on, and at the same time worry about someone else taking over. Unless we're able to produce kids in a lab, the only way to do it is through this human body, but there are many people today who don't want to put up with the inconvenience of nine months of pregnancy and so on. Qadafi supposedly once said that they don't need terrorists and suicide bombers anymore to overcome Europe, they'll do it with the womb of the Arab woman.

It's a special concern in a democracy, because when it comes to an election, it doesn't matter whether you're a professor or a lawyer or a pauper in the street, they all have one vote. When that is the case, and when these new arrivals eventually cast the same vote as anyone else, the fear is that 'one man, one vote' will overturn everything. That's why citizenship rights are such a difficult issue. Some countries such as Holland have allowed people who have lived there a long time to become citizens. If you give immigrants citizenship rights, and they continue to produce children as they do, there's a real likelihood of tipping the scales.

Your point is that when it comes to immigration, it's important to call for compassion and welcome, but it's also important to stress the church's message on openness to new life?

Certainly the church has a message of compassion toward immigrants, and a lot of its apostolate is to ensure their rights and so on. Even here, though I think it's important for me to say something to both sides. I've also gone to some Ghanaian communities here in Rome to encourage them to do the type of thing that shows they are ready to integrate. They need to learn the language, to appreciate the culture, so that people will be ready to accept them. If you don't do those things, you will keep yourself apart.

But at the end of the day, Italy will be a host country only as long as Italy itself exists. That means the demographic index cannot fall below a certain percentage. If it does, its civilization is not sustainable, and that's the thing we need to accept and understand. When the birth rate falls too low, the civilization is difficult to sustain. We form civilizations with people. So while I appeal on behalf of immigrants, in favor of their rights and so, I would also speak to the host countries. It's in the interests of Africa that Italy exists. It's in the interests of the immigrants themselves that the host countries to which they're going continue to exist. I don't think it's the aim of any of these guys coming in to take over.

The Holy Father recently appointed a lay woman as your under-secretary, Fiamina Giovanelli. Does that have any significance in terms of women in the church?

I have to confess that this is just my fourth week in the office, so I didn't have much input into that, but I appreciate it. Symbolically, I think it does mean something. As you know, the secretaries and under-secretaries are appointed by the Holy Father, and this is the second woman, the first being a nun in the Congregation for Religious. [Italian Salesian Sr. Enrica Rosanna, appointed as under-secretary of the Congregation for Religious in 2004]. I think the Holy Father must have seen in this, and especially for this office, the Council for Justice and Peace, an important message about concern for the role of women, including in the Roman Curia. It sent an eloquent message, in that sense, that the curia is not closed to women, allowing only men and priests to function. In fact, in this dicastery, there are 18 of us and only seven or eight priests. The rest are all laity, and several are women. So, I think this office is very much in the forefront of upholding the women's contribution to the Roman Curia.

You're saying that women actually run your office?

Well, not quite, but they have a crucial role!

Last time you were in Rome, for the synod, you said some things about condoms and about a black pope that kicked up dust in the media. This week, you've seen the "Boffo case" explode in the Italian papers. Have you been surprised by how the press covers the church?

I've not had much experience with all of this, but I was surprised at that press conference how what I said on condoms was taken out of context. I got so many phone calls that night about what was said, and what the newspapers said. It became necessary for Fr. Lombardi to come to me that night and have the interview transcribed. I thought that was unfortunate, for whatever motives it happened I don't know.

This, unfortunately, is that character of a lot of the newspapers around the world right now. Anything negative about the church makes news. The other day, just after the business in Ireland, I was on a plane and I read about the thing at Canisius College in Germany [where a sexual abuse crisis has emerged]. Things like that make news, I suppose because of the way the church presents itself as a big moral authority, a voice of conscience, and all of that.

As far as Italy goes, I have lived here before, but it was as a student and frankly I didn't pay much attention to this sort of thing. My concern was to finish my work and get out.

Have you had to learn to speak differently?

Definitely. I've had to pick up a certain amount of circumspection. Sometimes I'll say things as a joke, with a smile, but in the reporting the smile doesn't get presented. At least on television, people can see that this guy said this with a smile, but in reporting that doesn't come across. I've taught myself a small lesson about that.

I still approach a whole lot of this with a certain amount of, not innocence, but a certain amount of truthfulness that I wish those who are doing the interview would also carry. I can also go to an interview with non-committal statements, with generalizations and all of that, and at the end you can't pin anything on me, but I've also said nothing. I don't want to do that. I've decided not to do it, because otherwise the interview serves for nothing. I prefer to say what I think I want to say, and run the risk of having it taken out of context.

The other day, somebody asked me the question about a 'black pope.' I told him that obviously anybody who becomes a priest can become a bishop, a cardinal, whatever. But I also said point-blank that unfortunately, our world today is too color-sensitive. This is the truth. But somebody could report that in a way that makes me sound racist, which would be unfortunate, but I think the truth also needs to be said. When it comes to a black pope, a lot of people say it doesn't matter, but the truth is that it would matter a lot.

You think a black pope is more likely or less likely because of that?

I can't say what the cardinals might be thinking about when they go in there, but I can say this: I wouldn't want to be that first black pope. I think he'll have a rough time.

[John Allen is NCR senior correspondent. His e-mail address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on 01/26/2015 - 14:58): <http://ncronline.org/news/peace-justice/vaticans-justice-peace-head-says-what-he-thinks>