

African Synod

I would like to speak today from the personal blessing of having lived and served for many years within the African Church. In Africa I have recognized the holiness of the land and the presence of God in the people. There is great giftedness present in the many peoples and nations- a richness of faith and the blessings of a vast diversity of expressions of that faith which is a living hymn and a dance of praise to God. Africa is a sacred soil and our brothers and sisters of the African Church know well the love of our God.

But from that same sacred soil we also hear the cry of the blood. Blood shed through wars among nations, old and new colonialism, ethnic and tribal conflicts, through discriminations because of race and religion, the blood of the young orphan infected with HIV and malaria cells; the blood poured out in violence against women – especially in their own homes; the blood of the terminally poor, whose dignity cries out, seeking to be heard and recognized; the blood shed in the abuse of ruthless power, the lack of shared democracy, the unjust distribution and use of earth richness; the blood of martyrs who have sown the seeds of faith for the future Church of Africa. Like the blood of Abel (*Gen 4:10*), the blood soaks soil of Africa, too, calls out to God and to us.

It is this reality which rightly requires that the African Church, the family of God in Africa, be first of all, a church of “in service of reconciliation” (42). The Church must hear the cries of the blood of our African sisters and brothers- a blood that calls out from sacred soil and which flows and fills her cup of suffering to overflowing. The Church must be a place where the cry of the blood is not silenced or ignored, but a place where the cup of suffering can be transformed by the good news of the Precious Blood of Christ, given for the redemption of the whole world (Col 1:20).

The African Church continues the reconciling mission of Christ, “the basis for the Church’s mission” (42), when it gives voice to the blood which cries out from the soil and demands justice. And the African Church continues the reconciling mission of Christ when it gives voice to the blood of Christ which announces the gift of mercy and forgiveness; for there can be no reconciliation without forgiveness.

We read in the *Instrumentum laboris* (87) of the power of the waters of baptism to unite and create a reconciled community of faith. It is our prayer that “the bond created by the waters of Baptism is stronger than blood-ties.” These blood-ties, while of great value in the African culture, often lead to division and separation. The waters of baptism speak powerfully for unity, but even stronger, I would say, is the image of the Precious Blood of Christ which destroys all hostilities that separate God’s people (Eph 2:14). It is the blood of Christ, poured out in the suffering of the cross, that makes all peoples “members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). The Blood of Christ is the blood of a new covenant (Mt 26:28) which brings us into a new and eternal relationship with God and with one another. Like the water and blood which flowed from his side (Jn 19:34), Christ continues to use the water of baptism and the blood of the Eucharist to reconcile the people of his family and the whole world.

Just as God, who heard the cries of his people and their pleas for liberation from slavery under Pharaoh, used blood to sign the doors and lintels through which His people would pass through to freedom (Ex 12:7, the African church which hears the cry of the blood, the cries of the African people, must lift up the chalice of the blood of Christ and boldly proclaim that Africa's cup of suffering can become a blessing cup (1Cor 10:16) through the transforming power of Christ. Christ is the peaceful liberator who touches the hearts of his people. The African Church realizes that reconciliation is firstly God's work in Christ. In this sense reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy, but it must be a spirituality that leads the Family of God in Africa to become ambassadors of Christ (2Cor 5:20) who create a space for truth, justice, healing and the emergence of a new creation (2Cor 5:17). It is this spirituality that also leads the Church, as Christ's ambassadors, to engage in dialogue with the spirituality of the people of Islam and of the traditional African religions.

The cup of suffering becomes a cup of blessing in the celebration of Eucharist and in the lived witness of communion with those that suffer—a witness that finds authentic expression in all that we do to embody the love of God through the promotion of peace and justice. The African Church must be a bold living proclamation of the Good News of salvation and reconciliation given through the Precious Blood of Christ, a proclamation that is authenticated by our committed actions of solidarity that liberates the poor and the downtrodden, all those who are embraced in the inner sanctuary of the heart of God. The Church in Africa must also be courageous in denouncing those realities of exploitation, of peoples and the earth, which are the spoiled fruit of corrupt governments.

But Africa is not only a place of suffering and exploitation; it is also a continent where many of its countries are experiencing rapid social and economic development. The Church has an important opportunity to encourage and guide this development through the formation of good and honest leadership which works for the happiness and social growth of the whole population of their country without distinction of race, religion and social status. We must encourage the African people to recognize and accept that they have, with the help of God, the ability to create their own destiny. Here the Church has the opportunity to be a vocal advocate for the continuing relevance and importance of the spiritual dimensions of culture, which has long held a central place in African culture.

The African Church must give witness that we have been reconciled by Christ and given his ministry of reconciliation. We do this first by the witness of living as a reconciled community of faith. There can be no authentic proclamation of reconciliation without this first step (53). The road to reconciliation in Africa begins with our acknowledgment of our own need to be reconciled as a Church. The Body of Christ, which is the African Church, must be united in the love of Christ. We must be the model of unity in which all members of the body are willing to share in the suffering of one, just as we share in each other's joy (1Cor 14:26). In this way, we demonstrate the unifying power of the waters of baptism and the Precious Blood of Christ and we are able to invite all to participate in the redemptive mystery of Christ.

The people of Africa, the very soil of our continent, cry out and ask us to be faithful to the ministry that has been entrusted to us. The African Church is an ambassador of Christ; a Church

of incarnated love and lived solidarity; a *diakonia* church of reconciliation that is faithfully rooted in a commitment to justice and peace. In this way, Africa becomes a new creation (2Cor 5:17) and we fulfill our mission of “bringing about a better, more authentic, more just, more peaceful, more reconciled, more fraternal and more happy world” (47).