



**THE LAY FAITHFUL IN AFRICA:
SALT OF THE EARTH AND LIGHT OF A NEW WORLD**

In the light of the Post-Synod Exhortation, "Africae Munus"

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INTRODUCTION:

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies my Lord Archbishops and Bishops, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters, Distinguished Lay Participants, dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

With warmest greetings from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, I wholeheartedly welcome the opportunity to participate in this important Congress and, during the coming hour, attempt to shed the light of *Africae Munus* upon the vocation and mission of Christians in Africa.

In his message to the Plenary Assembly of *the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*, last November, the Holy Father said: "In view of the fact that the *social question* is increasingly becoming complex, but interrelated in its varied spheres, it is particularly urgent to form the Catholic laity in the *social*

teaching of the Church. Indeed, the immediate task of working for a just social order belongs to the lay faithful; and it is necessary to form a laity capable of dedicating itself to the *common good*, especially in the very complex area of politics.” Then, Benedict XVI went on to identify the *social teaching of the church* as representing “the essential reference point for the planning and *social action* of the lay faithful, as well as for their *spiritual life*”.¹

Pope Benedict XVI's affirmation that, in the life of the faithful, Christian *social commitment* and *social action* flow from *spirituality* is very significant, and this will be the main thrust of my contribution, under my assigned topic, to this congress. For, as Benedict XVI teaches, *the inner purification of man is the essential prior condition for building peace and justice. “But this purification and inner development towards true humanity cannot exist without God”* (AM, 19). The point of departure will be the faith-experience of every Christian. Then I will turn to the II Synod for Africa and the Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, and take up their presentation of the spirituality of discipleship in terms of “salt of the (African) earth” and “light of a (new) world”. The third part will specify the spirituality as oriented towards social commitment and social action. And in conclusion, we will hear the Synod’s challenging invitation, “Africa, stand up and walk!”, as the awakening of the lay faithful to their place and role in the Church and in the African society.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Message 3-XI-2010*, §4-5

1. THE “FAITH-EXPERIENCE/SPIRITUALITY” OF THE LAY FAITHFUL: CHRISTIANS, DISCIPLES AND SHARING IN CHRIST:

In *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict teaches that a true understanding of any Church mission and ministry starts with the faith experience of the ecclesial community itself. Responding to God’s revelation of his love and truth in Jesus, people are transformed by the power of God’s word and re-socialized by His love in the Holy Spirit. This new social reality, the ecclesial community, proclaims the love and truth of the Trinitarian life which surrounds it;² and from this experience, people become subjects of love, truth and service. Inspired by the love of Christ and his example of service, not only are Christians called to become *builders of an earthly city which anticipates and prefigures the heavenly city of God*;³ but the entire Church, also seeks to offer “*the fruits of love*”, which St. Paul identifies as “*reconciliation, peace and justice*”.⁴

The proclamation of the *kingdom of God* and its establishment, in all its detail, were first the mission of Jesus Christ. He was the first agent of this mission; and it was he who prepared other agents, who were to be like him and who were to be entrusted with the on-going proclamation and establishment of the *kingdom of God*. These were the disciples/apostles of Jesus; and their successors are primarily the Bishops, but also in a general way all ordained ministers and, indeed, every baptized Christian in the Church. What is required of them all: Bishops, Priests, Religious and Lay Faithful, is that *they be like*

² *Caritas in veritate*, §54. In the light of the revealed mystery of the Trinity, we understand that true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration.

³ Cf. *Caritas in veritate*, § 7

⁴ Cf. 1Cor.13:4-7; *Africae Munus*, §3.

Jesus; and with a reference to the Last Supper episode in the Gospel of John, I would like to depict this common vocation of the lay faithful and, indeed, of all Christians, not only as a call to *discipleship*, but most importantly, as an invitation to be assimilated to Christ.

“I have given you an example....”

To the disciples whose feet Jesus had just washed in the context of the Last Supper meal, he said: "*I have given you an example....*" (Jn.13:15). Let us recognize first and foremost that this episode is reported only in the Gospel of John. It is part of Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper with his disciples before the "*Passover*"; and the whole episode is cast in the shadow of the arrival of the "*hour*" of Jesus (Jn.13:1-20).

The Last Supper in the Gospel of John, as you well know, was not the *Passover meal*, as in the Synoptic Gospels. For the Gospel of John, the *Passover* event was celebrated by Jesus on the cross, where his crucifixion represented the sacrifice of the (new) *Passover lamb*. This being the case, the Last Supper meal in the Gospel of John was not dominated by the theme of sacrifice: *the breaking of bread and the pouring out of the cup* (Synoptic Gospels). John's Last Supper meal was dominated rather by the theme of *service* (the washing of feet) and the *self-emptying* that it entailed; and this was offered to the disciples of Jesus as the *way of fellowship (having a part) with Jesus* and an *example*, as the account shows.

At the Last Supper School of Jesus:

- 1) As you may recall, when in the Gospel of Mark Jesus chose the twelve apostles, they were “*those he wanted*”, who “*came to him*” and who were “*to be with him*” (Mk.3:14). From there, they were to be sent on mission: to preach the Gospel and to receive “*power/authority*” (ἐξουσία) to expel demons, like Jesus. They were to enter into a new relationship with Jesus, characterized by an intimacy that assimilated the life of the apostles to that of Jesus. This call to an intimacy that assimilated the life of the followers of Jesus to that of their Lord and Master is also the scope of Jesus’ washing of the feet of his disciples. They were “*to have a share with Jesus*” (Jn.13:8b).

To have a share/part with someone is to be his partner: to share in his work, and ultimately in his reward (cfr. prayer of Jesus in Jn.17:6-10, 24-26; and Mt.25:34). The Levites had no part in the inheritance of Israel, for their work was different from that of the other tribes (Dt.10:9; 12:12). Simon Magus had no part in the apostolic endowments of the Spirit, for he was animated by ideals different from those of the apostles: “*his heart was not right before God*” (Acts 8:21). A Christian has no part with an unbelieving heathen (2Cor. 6:12). Consequently, “*to have a share with Jesus*” is to be identified/associated with Jesus, assimilated to him, to be like him and to be configured to him: to his person and to his mission and ministry. Accordingly, to decline Jesus’ *feet-washing* is to decline the call to discipleship; for discipleship requires *having a share with Jesus*, which only his *feet-washing* bestows. Thus “*Having a share with Jesus*” expresses the bond of fellowship that must exist between the master and his disciple: a bond which the master does not spare any means to establish, including emptying himself to be a slave. All that this bond of

fellowship requires is that *the disciples are clean*; that “justified by faith in Jesus” (Gal.2:16), they adhere to him.

One may describe *having a share with Jesus* as the “*spirituality of discipleship*”; and it entails:

- the dignity of Jesus' *messianic* ministry and service, which the disciples receive as an *example given*, and
- the more radical and prior adherence to the person of Jesus as *disciples*, which the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul describe as “*being baptized into Jesus/in his name*” (cfr. 1Cor.10:1-3).

The experience of the disciple that is presented here is his *conversion to Christ*; and it is the first and basic form of having a share with Jesus. Without it no true and lasting experience of life with Jesus is possible. It needs to be deep, and it needs to be permanent, leading to “*having the very mind of Christ*” (cfr. 1Cor.2:16); Phil.2:5).

Some challenges to the Conversion Experience (of the Lay Faithful):

--The first and greatest challenge to the lay faithful, as disciple, is the making of a “*faith-experience of Jesus*”: the experience of *conversion* and the development of the *mind of Christ*, as a disciple. As a bishop friend of mine from the NW part of the USA expresses this challenge: “*We need to stop being compliant Catholics-Christians, and start being converted Catholic-Christians*”.

--Elsewhere, I myself have spoken about the danger that our introduction to the faith through the simple teaching of Catechism often makes us *notional Christians*, instead of converted Christians: Christians for

whom a relationship with Christ is central and paramount to their lives and everything they do. And having deeply converted disciples/ lay faithful to exercise ministries in the Church is priceless.

--There is yet another challenge to a deep Christian conversion: It is what is talked about as “*light-coke/light-beer Christianity*”; and it is Christianity devoid of its rough edges and harsh challenges: It is a compromised Christianity and Christianity of comfort; And there is a lot of this around!

So, “*having a share with Christ*” as the expression of our configuration, as disciples, to his image through a permanent conversion constitutes the *spirituality of discipleship*; and it is a very basic challenge to any form and every form of Christian ministry today. It is the *spirituality of the disciple* that gives meaning to his mission and sustains him in it. For, we cannot do as Jesus did without the “*mind*” and the “*attitude*” of Christ!

- 2) Speaking of the “*attitude*” and “*mind of Christ*”, let us also note that the *washing of feet*, through which Jesus assimilates his followers to himself, is an ***act of service*** through which he reveals his love for his disciples. When Jesus lays aside his outer garment, ties a towel around his waist and begins to wash the feet of his disciples, he plays a servant role (*service*), through which he, the servant-Messiah, enacts the message of his incarnation, making divinity serve humanity, so that humanity may be divinized.
- 3) Additionally, washing their feet and giving them the example of his humble service, Jesus teaches his disciples a lesson whose striking

feature consists in the juxtaposition of the pre-eminently exalted status of divine Jesus with the servant-function of feet-washing. But it is this feature which makes Jesus' act *messianic and revelatory of his great love for his disciples*. When now Jesus sets this before his disciples as an example, he makes the life of the disciple an experience of the *messianic times*, with its reversal of value systems. Self-denial/emptying in this *example* is not a loss. It is a gain: the expression of love.

- 4) Finally, in the example of *the washing of feet*, Jesus also teaches his disciples about intimacy and solidarity that washing one another's feet establishes among them. This being the case, the mission of making other people disciples (Jn.17:20) and admitting them into the fellowship of the followers of Christ, which the disciples received from Jesus, becomes a charge that can be accomplished only through their humble service (of *washing the feet of believers*). This *humble service*, as an expression of love, becomes also the way of extending the circle of intimacy and fellowship among the disciples and followers of Christ in the world. It becomes the "***way of their mission***", even if it is a scandal for the world and discordant with prevailing values.

2. "A SPIRITUALITY OF DISCIPLESHIP" FOR SOCIAL COMMITMENT: The Lay Christian and Disciple as "Salt of the (African) Earth" and "Light of a (new) World":

The profile of the disciple described above constitutes his *spirituality (faith-experience)*. It is rich, many-layered and challenging. However, when Jesus refers to the same disciple and follower as "*salt of the earth*" and "*light of the*

world” (Mt.5:13-14), he relates the *spiritual life* and *faith-experience* of the disciple to the disciple's world. The *faith-experience* of the disciple and his assimilation to Christ must lead to *social action*: a commitment to the earth and to the world.

This relationship of *spirituality* to *social action* brings to mind a reflection Blessed Pope John Paul II made at the beatification of Adolfo Kolpings (1813-1865), namely, that Christianity could not consider itself simply "a room for prayer", but must be "inserted in daily life and oriented to reforming the social reality. Human and Christian responsibility needed to be exercised in these places: in family and in Church, in work and in politics.”⁵ For, as John Paul II further observes, “In the pluralistic society of our day, it is especially due to the commitment of Catholics in public life that the Church can exercise a positive influence. Whether they be professionals or teachers, businessmen or civil servants, law enforcement agents or politicians, Catholics are expected to bear witness to goodness, truth and justice and love of God in their daily life. The task of the lay faithful is to be *salt of the earth and light of the world*, especially in those places where only the lay person is able to render the Church present”.⁶

So, *the commitment of Catholics in public life, through which the Church exercises a positive influence in society* is presented in African Synod II and in *Africae munus* under the images of *salt* and *light*. They are images which first applied to the presence of Jesus in the world; and on account of the flight of

⁵ Kolping cercò di scuotere i cristiani dall'indolenza e di richiamarli alle loro responsabilità nei confronti del mondo. Per lui il cristianesimo non doveva intendersi semplicemente come una “stanza di preghiera”, ma inserito nel quotidiano e volto alla formazione della realtà sociale. I luoghi, in cui si deve esercitare la responsabilità umana e cristiana sono per lui: la famiglia, la Chiesa, il lavoro e la politica. John Paul II, *Homily*, 27.10.1991.

⁶ *Ecclesia in Africa*, §108.

the holy Family to Egypt, Benedict XVI says that *In Jesus 2000 years ago, God himself brought salt and light to Africa* (AM 6). What God brought to the world in Jesus, Jesus now bestows it on his disciples. The disciples are now like Jesus, *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*; and the additional meaning which these two metaphors (“*salt of the earth*” and “*light of the world*”) add to the image of the lay faithful as *disciple*, we shall briefly explore.

- ***The Disciple and Christian Lay Faithful as “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”:***

Occurring right after the “Beatitudes”, the saying about “*salt*” and “*light*” appear to be an application of Jesus’ teaching on the mount to the life of his disciples. The new Moses pronounces a new teaching, which will make his disciples like “*salt of the earth*” and “*light of the world*”.

a) ***“Salt of the Earth”:***

The metaphor, “*salt*”, which Jesus uses in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt.5:13; Mk.9:50; Lk.14:34) to describe the presence and role/task his disciples in the world, has several senses. Thus, since the “Dead Sea” is also referred to as “sea of salt” (Gen.14:3), for the settlers in Palestine who dwell close to the “Dead Sea”, “*salt*” is synonymous with “*death*” (cfr. Gen.19:26), judgement and a curse (Dt.29:23; Jer.17:6; Ps.107:34). God, the Lord of life, however, will heal the waters of the “sea of salt” with the water from the temple and give it life (Ezech.47).

In another context, salt has a preservative power. It preserves food; and in a related sense, as in the case of Elisha’s purification of the waters of Jericho (2Kg.2:19-22), salt also has a purifying power.

The use of salt to seal friendship and pacts in the world of the Old Testament (Ezra 4:14) seems to underlie God's use of the imagery to express the permanence and stability of the arrangement regarding the livelihood of priests in the Old Testament: "*It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord...*" (Nm.18:19). The use of salt in covenant situations may also underlie Jesus' invitation to his disciples to "*have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another*" (Mk.9:50), namely, to observe the mutual loyalty of covenant relationship and to live at peace.

But, salt also symbolizes "wisdom" and "moral strength"; and it is what gives value to things. That is what happens, for example, when salt is used to fertilize the soil; and most importantly, when it is used, on the one hand, to season and to preserve food items, and, on the other, to give taste to food (Job 6:6; Mt.5:13; Lk.14:34).

When Jesus refers to his disciples as "*salt of the earth*", he is making use of a polyvalent symbol to express the multiple tasks and commitments of a disciple for the well-being of the world: from rendering the earth fertile for the Gospel to giving it life and preserving it from corruption of evil/sin.

Thus, on a continent, parts of which live under the shadow of conflict and death, it takes the lay faithful, as disciple and *salt of the earth*, to preserve the continent and its people from the putrefying effects of hatred, violence, injustice and ethnocentrism. The lay disciples of Christ must purify and heal minds and hearts of corrupt and evil ways. They must administer their life-giving Gospel message to keep the continent

and its people alive, preserving them in the path of virtue and gospel values, such as reconciliation, justice and peace.⁷ But most importantly, the “*salt*” symbol invites the disciple and lay faithful to expend themselves (dissolve) for the benefit of the continent and its people out of love. For the lay disciple of Christ, self denial is not a loss; it is a gain: an expression of love!

b) “***Light of the World***”:

The reference to the disciples as “*light of the world*” is a recourse to an imagery, which the Old Testament applies often to Zion, as an attribute and an expression of its mission towards the world. Subsequently, the Servant-Messiah will be called upon to assume this as his vocation; and in Jesus, this will be fulfilled. Jesus, then, as “*light of the world..... that enlightens everyone*” (Jn.1:9), enlightens his disciples and makes them also “*light of the world*”.

➤ *Zion, the city on a hill and Light to the Nations:*

--- Zion was the mountain of the house of the Lord (Is.2:2), founded by God (Is.14:32) for the dwelling of his Name (Dt.12:5) and of the Ark of the Covenant (2Sm.6; Kg.8:20-21).

The Ark of the Covenant contained the Law of God; and the Law was “*a lamp, and its teaching a light*” (Prov.6:23; Ps.19:8; 119:105; Baruch 4:2). It was also source of wisdom (Dt.4:6), instruction for life (Baruch 3:9; 4:1) and saving knowledge (Ps.119:104, 130); wherefore the *Testament of Levi* exhorted the Jews saying: “*Be ye lights of Israel,*

⁷ Cf. SECAM Seminar on the Synod, Abidjan Côte d’Ivoire, 2009: Carrefour Groupe III.

purser than all gentiles.... What would the gentiles do if you are darkened by transgressions” (14:3).

God’s presence (Name), however, denoted the Lord’s saving presence and action (Ps.36:9); and the “*light of the Lord’s face*” referred to God’s saving presence or action (Is.10:17; Ps.27). Thus the great restoration and vindication of Jerusalem by Yahweh was described by Isaiah in terms of the return of Yahweh’s light: “*Yahweh will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down nor shall your moon withdraw itself; for Yahweh will be your everlasting light (Is.60:19-20).* As a result of that experience of Yahweh’s salvation, Jerusalem now became a witness of Yahweh’s saving power, a *reflection of Yahweh’s saving light (Is.60:1-2)*, in response to which the nations would come to her light, and kings to the brightness of her rising (cfr. Is.60:3).

Thus, on account of her possession of the *light of knowledge of the Law* and the *light of God’s salvation*, Jerusalem became a light to the nations and kings.

➤ *The experience of Zion became the Vocation of the Servant-Messiah:*
In the hands of Isaiah, the experience of Jerusalem is presented as the *vocation of a servant-figure*. The servant of Yahweh, who is endowed with Yahweh’s Spirit to bring justice to the nations (Is.42:1; 51:4), is also given as a covenant to the people and “*light to the nations*” (Is.42:6; 49:8ff.). His call to be “*light to the nations*” was to enable Yahweh’s salvation to reach the ends of the earth; but it also involved his own

experience of Yahweh's salvation (Is.49:7). In these *servant passages*, "**light**", was knowledge of the Law and of the salvation of God; and it was a gift destined to reach all people.

➤ *Jesus fulfils the vocation of the Servant-Messiah:*

The figure of the Servant-Messiah is fulfilled in Jesus. Mt.4:16 quotes Is.9:2 and alludes to the star at the birth of Jesus to underline the fulfilment and continuation, in Jesus, of the revelatory and salvific symbolism of *light* in the Old Testament. Jesus is the "*light of God's salvation*" (Jn.1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:46); and he is the "*light of God's Word/Law/Wisdom*" (Jn.1:4; 9:5; 12:36, 46). Jesus is the "*light of the world*" (Lk.2:32; Jn.1:9), and he dies and rises to "*proclaim light both to the people and to the gentiles*" (Acts 26:23).

➤ *Jesus' Disciples and the Lay Faithful as Light of the World:*

The reference, then, to the disciples as "*light of the world*" is nothing less than Jesus considering his disciples as his representation and the extension of his presence (as the word of knowledge and salvation) in the world. "*You are the light of the world*", then expresses the lofty vocation and mission of the disciples of Jesus: a call to be Christ-like, in fulfilment of Israel's vocation and mission in the Old Testament as witnesses of the *light of knowledge* and of *God's salvation* in the world. In this regard, let us recall the exhortation of the *Testament of Levi* to the Jews:

"Be ye lights of Israel, purer than all gentiles.... What would the gentiles do if you are darkened by transgressions".

And so, what would the world do if Christians are darkened by transgressions?

(Cf. Cardinal Tumi's story at Eucharistic Congress, Quebec).

Clearly, it is necessary for the *salt* to remain *salt*, and the *light* to remain *light* in order to make a difference in the world. Thus, the metaphors: *salt* and *light*, express the exercise of roles (by the disciples) on the earth and in the world, in view of which they must maintain the distinctiveness of their identity in the world in order to make a difference: a distinctiveness of identity that constitutes their *holiness* and which is the fruit of their *spirituality*.⁸ The metaphors themselves (*salt* and *light*), however, do not name and specify the exact roles they exercise on earth and in the world. They leave them open; and so African Synod II, but especially, the post-synod exhortation, *Africae munus*, do two things:

- i. they recommend and suggest means for fostering and maintaining the distinctiveness of the disciples (*salt* and *light*): their spirituality and holiness;
- ii. they present *service to reconciliation, justice and peace*, as the framework for the exercise of the roles of being *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*.

3. FOSTERING AND SUSTAINING THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE LAY FAITHFUL:

⁸ *Africae munus* identifies several ways of preserving and nourishing the *spirituality of discipleship*: the *Word of God* and the *Sacraments*, especially, the Eucharist, basic Christian Communities, devotional Groups and Confraternities.

As Ambassadors of Christ in the public sphere, in the heart of the world, lay people are called first and foremost to *holiness* (AM 128). Indeed, a certain *inner purification and an inner development towards true humanity* is an essential prior condition for building justice and peace (AM 19); but it is God who creates these in the lay faithful. It is through Christ and the Holy Spirit that the lay faithful become *salt of the earth* and *light of the world* (AM 13).

That is why Benedict XVI insists, in *Africae Munus*, that the first duty of Bishops is “to bring the good news of salvation to all, and to offer the faithful a catechesis which leads them to a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ”. He urges them to “see to it that laypeople acquire a genuine awareness of their ecclesial mission and encourage them to engage in it with responsibility, always seeking the common good..”⁹

Referring to the Synods on the Word of God and on the Eucharist, and relying on their pastoral experiences, the Synod Fathers at African Synod II and the Holy Father in *Africae munus* recommend:

- The reading and the meditating of the Word (*lectio divina*) and the celebration of the sacraments, especially, *Penance and the Eucharist*
- Cultivation of an *interior life* and *relationship with God* (praying people),
- The development of *formation centres* for spirituality, Bible, the “Social Doctrine of the Church” for the lay faithful in public life: *for their formation in honesty, credibility and the value of work*. Cf. eg.

⁹ *Africae Munus*, § 103.

the recent document of the PCJP: *The Vocation of the Business Leader*, where work and business are presented as “vocation”.

- The formation and membership in lay associations and movements for mutual support, an on-going formation and the exercise of charisms.

4. “SERVICE TO RECONCILIATION, JUSTICE AND PEACE”: *AFRICAE MUNUS and the Social Commitment of the Spirituality of the Lay Faithful:*

The African Synod II and the post-Synod exhortation, *Africae munus*, present service to *reconciliation, justice and peace* as the framework for the social action of the lay faithful/disciple in Africa, as *salt of the earth and light of the world*. The reason for the presentation of this framework lies in the relationship that Benedict XVI sees between African Synod I and African Synod II,¹⁰ and in the fact that, for the Pontiff, theology must always generate pastoral action and pastoral care.

At the opening mass of the II Special Assembly for Africa, for example, Benedict XVI observed that *it is ideological to merely make proposals without moving on to action (fare proposte senza passare all' azione è un' ideologia)*; and when he reflected on the theme of the synod to the Roman Curia, as a mission-statement for the Church in Africa, the Holy Father

¹⁰ *Africae munus*, §1

said: “*The task of Bishops was to transform theology into pastoral care, namely into a very concrete pastoral ministry in which the great perspectives found in sacred Scripture and Tradition find application in the activity of Bishops and priests in specific times and places.*”¹¹

This, then, is a way of relating African Synod I to African Synod II, and the passage from the image (identity) of *Church-family of God* to the Church’s social action (ministry) of *service to reconciliation, justice and peace*.

➤ ***"Church-Family of God" and "Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace":***

The reference to the Church, as *family of God*, though not completely new, was a significant paradigm shift: it proposed a theological model for understanding the Church which resonated well with African culture. And, on account of the explicit intention of Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus* that the II Special Assembly for Africa continue the I Special Assembly for Africa of 1994,¹² one may relate the theological model of *Church-family of God* of African Synod I with *service to reconciliation, justice and peace* of African Synod II, as “the concrete ministry and pastoral care” which a new way of understanding and living the Church in Africa calls for.

The imagery of *church-family of God* is first and foremost one that describes *communion, fraternal solidarity (AM 8)* and *integration* as the basic **identity** of the Church. The Church-family of God is a reality

¹¹ *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Members of the Roman Curia.....*, 21 Dec. 2009; *Africae munus*, § 10.

¹² *Africae munus*, §1

in *communion: in communion with God and in communion with one another*.¹³

In the II Special Assembly for Africa, then, the Church in Africa recognized that she becomes truly the *family of God* and the *brotherhood of Christ* to the extent that she promotes a Church that is truly a place of *communion*: an African Church and society in which people are reconciled and integrated over and above their tribal and ethnic ties, their racial and cast determinations, and their marginalization.¹⁴ The Church in Africa recognized that she can become truly the *family of God* she claims to be only to the extent that she becomes and promotes a society that lives in communion and enjoys justice and peace. In other words, *church-family of God* realizes her nature and identity as family and brotherhood to the extent that she causes “*family*”, “*brotherhood*”, “*communion*” and “*belongingness*” to happen: to the extent that she becomes incarnate on earth (*inculturates*) in the Christian communities, in human society and in human history as *members of a family in communion and fully belonging*.

Indeed, the church in Africa must be the historical form (face) of the *Kingdom of God* on the continent; and the Church cannot have an identity that does not become historical and real in history. So, the invitation to the *church-family of God* in Africa by the synod theme to be *servants of reconciliation, justice and peace* (as *salt of the earth and*

¹³ *Idem*, §8

¹⁴ Thus, when the Pope met with the Bishops of Cameroon, he exhorted to *communion*, saying: "In this way, the faithful are led to grasp the fact that the Church is truly God's family, gathered in brotherly love; this leaves no room for ethnocentrism or factionalism, and it contributes towards reconciliation and cooperation among ethnic groups for the good of all" (*Address of the Holy Father Benedict XVI Meeting with the Bishops of Cameroon*, 18 March 2009).

light of the world) is a challenge to the church in Africa to live up to her nature in the historical and concrete life of the continent by promoting communion and integration through reconciliation, justice and peace. It is a challenge to historical relevance and to concrete witness of identity in the life and experiences of the continent.

Therefore, the image and identity of the church as *family of God*, cannot be a mere (theological) affirmation; it must engender a commitment, an action and a ministry. Otherwise, *church-family of God* risks being a mere ideology! And for this not to happen, *Church-family of God* must generate a concrete mission and ministry: *service to reconciliation, justice and peace*.

Lay people, then, must be helped, as Paul VI taught, “*to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words, draw from the Social Teaching of the Church, developed in the course of history, principles of reflection, criteria of judgment and directives of action. It also devolves on them to identify with the help of the Holy Spirit – in communion with Bishops in charge and in dialogue with other Christian brothers and with all men of good will – the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic transformations seen in many cases to be urgently needed.*”¹⁵

¹⁵“Spetta alle comunità cristiane analizzare obiettivamente la situazione del loro paese, chiarirla alla luce delle parole immutabili dell'evangelo, attingere principi di riflessione, criteri di giudizio e direttive di azione nell'insegnamento sociale della chiesa, quale è stato elaborato nel corso della storia.....Spetta alle comunità cristiane individuare, con l'assistenza dello Spirito Santo - in comunione coi vescovi responsabili, e in dialogo con gli altri fratelli cristiani e con tutti gli uomini di buona volontà -, le scelte e gli impegni che conviene prendere per operare le trasformazioni sociali, politiche ed economiche che si palesano urgenti e necessarie in molti casi..” *OctagesimaAdveniens*, 1971, §4).

➤ ***The Lay Faithful in “service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace:***

Communion, the true form of all relationship, is based on *justice*. When it is broken or destroyed, because *justice* is not observed or respected, it is *reconciliation* that repairs it (communion/relationship) by *re-establishing justice*. *Justice* itself is often accompanied by ‘love’ and ‘mercy’; and its fruit is *peace*.

Justice is generally understood as “*giving to somebody that which is his due*”. In concrete and practical terms, however, it is “*respecting the demands of the relationships in which we stand*”. We are “***just***” when we respect the demands of the relationships in which we stand, and thus maintain the *relationships*. We are “***unjust/wicked***” when we disregard and disrespect the demands of the relationships in which we stand, and thus break or destroy the relationships. This is true between us, human beings, and God; and it is true among ourselves.

Reconciliation is when, after having been “unjust”, having disregarded the demands of the relationships in which we stand, and broken a relationship, we go back to ask for pardon and to ask to be forgiven. In forgiveness, we seek to restore *justice*, committing ourselves to respect the demands of the relationship. It requires humility and love.

Reconciliation may also be the initiative of the one offended. Out of love and mercy, he initiates forgiveness and offers pardon, even if it is not merited. That is why *justice* is often considered and exercised with love and mercy.

Although the exercise and the maintenance of *justice* in public life and in society, as a guarantee of harmony and peace, is always considered the task of politics and Government (AM. 17ff.), the Church always seeks to accompany its exercise by maintaining in view the *transcendent character* of *justice* and its subjects, and to safeguard the administration of *justice* from the temptations of the exercise of power, “the dark side of the human person”. For Benedict XVI, *one of the tasks of the Church in Africa consists in forming upright consciences receptive to the demands of justice, so as to produce men and women willing and able to build this just social order by their responsible conduct.*¹⁶ Carrying out her mission of “*truth*”, the Church avails herself of her *social doctrine*, “*a particular dimension of this proclamation (of the truth)*”¹⁷ to respond to their vocation to help build the social order: to establish justice in society.

➤ ***The Lay Faithful and Other Areas of Practical Ministry:***

Africae munus presents ***Education, Health Care, the Media*** and the ***Family*** as areas of lay apostolate or lay social commitments. One may also recall the general characterization of the world, as a *global village*, in view of which Benedict XVI recalls Blessed John Paul II’s recommendation of the spirit of dialogue: “*despite the modern civilization of the ‘global village’, in Africa as elsewhere in the world the spirit of dialogue, peace and reconciliation is far from dwelling in the hearts of everyone. Wars, conflicts and racist and xenophobic*

¹⁶ *Africae Munus*, §22. cf. too, §23 “the Church is engaged in the civic formation of citizens and in assisting with the electoral process in a number of countries. In this way she contributes to the education of peoples, awakening their consciences and their civic responsibility.”

¹⁷ *Idem*, §22.

attitudes still play too large a role in the world of human relations” (AM. 12).

Finally, let us recognize the “**family**” as the first and commonest setting for our *service to reconciliation, justice and peace* and other challenges to the living of the *spirituality of discipleship*. The family is not only the “*domestic church*” (AM. 7,8); it is the social institution which inspired the image of *Church-family of God*, inviting us to recognize the place of *fraternal solidarity, our common fraternity in Christ as the first born Son*, which should dispose us to be opposed to fratricidal wars, abuse of human dignity and all new forms of enslavement.

At least four statements in the post-Synodal Exhortation, *Africae Munus*,¹⁸ vividly call to mind the homily of Pope Benedict XVI in the opening liturgy of the II Special Assembly for Africa.

Reflecting then on the theological image, “*church-family of God*”, which the I Special Assembly applied to the Church, the Holy Father observed: “*This image is important not only for the Church in Africa, but also for the universal Church at a time when the family is under threat from those who seek to banish God from our lives. To deprive the African continent of God would be to make it die a slow death, by taking away its very soul*”.¹⁹ Furthermore, when Pope Benedict XVI described the task facing the II Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa

¹⁸ *Africae Munus*, §7,11,13,177.

¹⁹ *Idem*, §7. Emphasis (bold) mine. The threat which aspects of modernity pose to the family made Pope Benedict XVI observe to the Bishops of Angola and Sao Tomé: “Families are particularly in need of evangelization and practical support, since, in addition to the fragility and lack of inner stability of so many conjugal unions, there is the widespread tendency in society and culture to call into question the unique nature and specific mission of the family based on marriage,....” (*Address of Holy Father Benedict XVI: Meeting with the Bishops of Angola and Sao Tomé*, Luanda (Nunciature) 20 March 2009.

as consisting in transforming theology into pastoral care, he went on to refer to an "*anthropological crisis*" which was assailing the African continent and the rest of the world. In the face of this crisis, the Holy Father exhorted Africa to "*rediscover and promote a concept of the person and his or her relationship with reality that is the fruit of a profound spiritual renewal.*"²⁰

Both references to the *family threatened by a godless culture* and an *anthropology or sense of man deprived of a relationship with reality and spiritual sense* recall the Holy Father's admonition to Africa at the very beginning of the synod. In his homily at the opening mass of the II Special Assembly (2009), Pope Benedict XVI exhorted Africa and the Church in Africa to cherish its cultural and spiritual heritage²¹ "*which humanity needs even more than raw material*". "From this point of view", the Holy Father continued, "*Africa constitutes an immense spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in crisis of faith and hope*".²² Accordingly, Pope Benedict XVI passionately appealed to the African Church to ensure that the *spiritual 'lung'* they constituted for humanity was not affected by "*two dangerous pathologies*" that were stalking their paths. These were *religious fundamentalism*, combined with political and economic interests, and *practical materialism, combined with relativist and nihilistic thought*. The Pope referred to the latter as *sickness of the spirit*, with reference to the West, and, with reference to Africa (the developing world), a *spiritual toxic waste* which

²⁰ *Idem*, §11.

²¹ "..... *the extraordinary human and spiritual riches of its children, its variegated cultures, its soil and sub-soil of abundant resources.*" (*Africae Munus*, §13).

²² *Homily at the Opening Mass of the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (4 October 2009) = *Acta Apostolica Sedes*, 101(2009),907; Cf. *Africae munus*, §13.

the so-called first world was exporting and contaminating the people of other continents with.

According to Benedict XVI, this *sickness of the spirit* derives from ideologies which diminish man's vision of the truth. Instead of proposing his true vocation to *authentic and true love, to being a gift, to unity and brotherhood, to solidarity, to transcendence* and to *communion*, the ideologies reduce and limit him/her; and with reference to the Pope's first social encyclical, *caritas in veritate*, we may briefly point to five contemporary manifestations of this *sickness of the spirit*:

1. The first manifestation is self-sufficiency: *Man is only the product of human culture; and he evolves/fashions himself independently of human nature and any universal laws inherent in his being*. Thus man is the author of himself, of his/her life and of his society; and not only does he/she replace God, he/she does away with God completely.²³
2. Secondly and as a consequence, man thinks he/she owes nothing to anyone, except to himself.²⁴
3. Thus disconnected from the *common good* and *objective moral law*, man now seeks in *majority opinion*, however unstable it may be, the basis for the determination of the morality of law, giving the impression that *norms are created solely by consensus*.
4. A *technocratic ideology* idealizes technical progress and entrusts the entire process of development to technology alone. It produces an

²³ *Caritas in veritate*, § 34.

²⁴ *Idem*, § 43. The Pope warned Angolans (Africans) about this already during his visit: "Indeed, as a corrective to a widespread relativism which acknowledges nothing as definitive and, even more, tends to make its ultimate measure the individual and his personal caprice, we hold out another measure: the Son of God, who is also true man. Christ is the measure of true humanism." (*Address of the Holy Father Benedict XVI: Meeting with the Bishops of Angola and Sao Tomé*).

intoxicating sensation of man's self-sufficient 'autonomy' and a misguided notion of 'absolute freedom' which detaches progress from its moral evaluation and human responsibility.²⁵

5. Finally, there is the *utopia of a return to humanity's original natural state*, which *deconstructs conceptions about the human person and its institutions* (man, woman, family, marriage, children and their education). The truth about man, it is believed, would be freed of all models and moulds. Man would not be differentiated in any way. All would be equal and the same.

The culture of our day, then, as the Pope affirms, "*has burdens from which it must be freed and shadows from which it must emerge*".²⁶ Happily, in the incarnation of Jesus, the *love of the Father* and the *transcendent Word of God*, in human culture, every human culture, including that/those of our day, is offered the means of liberation to serve the well-being of humanity. Christ is the measure of true humanism, as the Pope said to the Bishops of Angola and Sao Tomé.

5. *Africa must live by Faith and Hope in God:*

Africae munus concludes its exhortation by ***calling Africa and the Church in Africa to hope.***

Indeed, before a gathering of the President of Benin, his Ministers, Diplomats and Religious Leaders, Pope Benedict XVI said: "*The word **hope** is*

²⁵ Cf. *Caritas in veritate*, § 14.

²⁶ *Idem*, §59. Cf. The London Summit for Maternal Health Care (2012).

found several times in the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Africae Munus, which I am shortly going to sign."²⁷

We have observed already that when Pope Benedict XVI traveled to Cameroon and Angola to deliver the *Instrumentum laboris* of the upcoming Special Assembly to the Church in Africa and the universal Church, he invited the Africans not to be afraid to believe (in Christ). Significantly, when he went back to Africa (Benin) to sign and to deliver his post-synod exhortation, *a call to hope* featured prominently in his addresses, especially in his address to the President, Ministers of State, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Religious Leaders at the presidential palace in Cotonou.²⁸

Right after greeting the dignitaries gathered in the presidential palace, the Holy Father began his address with these words: "*Speaking on other occasions, I have often joined the word **hope** to the word **Africa**. I did so in Luanda two years ago as well as in reference to the Synod.... When I say that Africa is a continent of hope, I am not indulging in mere rhetoric, but simply expressing a personal conviction which is also that of the Church.*" Indeed, for the Church, and so also for Pope Benedict XVI, to talk of *hope* is to talk about that which "*generates energy, which stimulates the intellect and gives the will all its dynamism*"; and this is so, because "*to talk of hope is to talk of the future and hence of God*". "*Having hope does not mean being ingenuous but making an act of faith in God, the Lord of history, and the Lord of our future.*"²⁹

²⁷ *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI: Meeting with Government Members, Representatives of Institutions of the Republic, Diplomatic Corps and Representatives of major Religions, Presidential Palace, Cotonou, Sat., 19 Nov. 2011. Emphasis mine. (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/no). Cf. too, Africae Munus, §9,10,12, 172.*

²⁸ *Idem.*

²⁹ *Idem.*

Between the terms: *hope, future* and *God*, there is a unity of reciprocal implication. Though rooted in the present, *hope* always belongs to the *future*; and there is no *future* without *God*. Thus the denial of *God* means the renunciation/rejection of *future* and the killing of *hope*. That is why in view of the threats of secularism and nihilistic thinking to Africa the Holy Father could write in *Africae Munus*: "*To deprive the African continent of God would be to make it die a slow death, by taking away its very soul*".³⁰

But the threats to Africa's *hope* do not come only from outside the continent. The Pope identified two sources of threats to Africa's *hope* from within itself:³¹

1. "The first relates in a general way to the socio-political and economic life of the continent": the prevalence of scandals and injustices, corruption and greed, errors and lies, violence which leads to misery and to death;
2. and the second relates to "interreligious dialogue": its rejection of prejudice, bigotry and "humanly self-centred truth", whose fruits are intolerance and the display of the base instincts of aggression.

In view of these *intra Africa* enemies of *hope*, the Holy Father made this passionate appeal in the presidential palace at Cotonou: "*From this place, I launch an appeal to all political and economic leaders of African countries and the rest of the world. Do not deprive your peoples of hope! Do not cut them off from their future by mutilating their present!.... You must become true servants of hope!..... May you all be sowers of hope!*" For, *hope* is communion.

³⁰ *Africae Munus*, §7.

³¹ cf. *Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI: Meeting with Government Members, Representatives of Institutions of the Republic, Diplomatic Corps and Representatives of major Religions*, Presidential Palace, Cotonou, Nov. 2011.

CONCLUSION: *Africa, Stand up and walk!*

This culminating expression of the great optimism which accompanied the II Special Assembly for Africa found its way into the *Message* of the synod-Fathers.³² It also concludes the post-Synodal Exhortation of the Holy Father;³³ and it gets addressed to Christians throughout Africa: “I also encourage you to have an active and courageous presence in the areas of political life, culture, the arts, the media and various associations. Do not be hesitant or ashamed about this presence, but be proud of it and conscious of the valuable contribution it can offer to the common good!”³⁴ .

Thus a key objective of the II Special Assembly for Africa and its post-Synodal Exhortation appears to be the invitation to Africa to rediscover and promote a concept of the person and of his relationship with reality that is the fruit of a profound spiritual renewal ... *a conversion of heart* and a *humanism whose true measure is only Christ*. It is such a conversion and Christian humanism which create the godly (virtuous) lives which must engender Africa's hope; for "*all upright human conduct is hope in action.*"³⁵ Hope-in-action disposes Africa to respond to the command *to stand up and walk*. “In order to ensure that the human person and the common good remain effectively at the centre of all human, political, economic or social activity, deepen your union with Christ, so as to know and love him by devoting time to

³² *Message, II Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, 2009. Pt.VI.*

³³ *Africae Munus*, § 172ff.

³⁴ *Africae Munus*, § 131.

³⁵ *Address of Holy Father Benedict XVI, Meeting with Political and Civil Authorities.....*

God in prayer and in the reception of the sacraments. Allow yourselves to be enlightened and instructed by God and by his word.”³⁶

In conclusion: *reconciliation* vertical and horizontal, with God and man, is inspired by God’s love, made known in Christ. The *justice* that ensues from God’s love is Christ; and it leads to *peace* which only Christ gives.

³⁶ *Africae Munus*, § 129.