

EXPERIENCES, TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS REGARDING THE PRIORITIES, PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF EVANGELIZATION

A speech by **His Grace, Most Rev. Tarcisio Ziyaye**
Archbishop of Blantyre, Malawi and President of AMECEA

During

THE PAN-AFRICAN CONGRESS OF CATHOLIC LAITY
Yaoundé, Cameroon (4th-9th September 2012)

Introduction:

In his introductory remarks to the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Blessed John Paul II invited the lay faithful by quoting from the Gospel of Saint Mark: “**And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them ‘You too go into the vineyard’**” (Mt. 20:3-4 cf. *Christifideles Laici* No. 2).

These words are in reference to the universal call to all members of the Church to participate in the mission of the Church. Indeed they fit very well in the theme of this Congress: *Being Witnesses of Jesus Christ in Africa Today*. Acknowledging that witnessing to the Gospel values is key element in the work of evangelization, I now intend to share a few insights in the life of the Church in Eastern Africa (this region covers the 9 countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia).

1. Experiences in the work of Evangelization:

Like all the African States, the first notable experience is successful work of the missionaries who planted the seed of the faith as a response to the work of Christ. This is what I wish to refer to as primary evangelization. It resulted in many becoming followers of Christ. To date, the following positive experiences in the work of evangelization can be recounted:

- i) Growth in numbers of Christians
- ii) Establishment of Institutes of Higher Learning which contribute to the formation and evangelization of the people. Such Institutes include the Catholic University of Eastern Africa and other Catholic Universities in almost all the nine countries mentioned above.

- iii) An increase in the number of agents of evangelization who are dedicated to the service of the Church. These include: rising vocations to the sacred priesthood (including local clergy), vocations to religious life, many catechists, etc.
- iv) A significant growth in organization of the particular churches whereby many parishes have been established. In this way, the Church is seen to be coming closer to the people.
- v) The significant growth of Small Christian Communities which offer a sense of belonging and within which real relationships are experienced.

2. Problems and challenges in the Work of Evangelization

As much as the Church in Eastern Africa has recorded the above listed successes, there are a number of issues that pose a challenge to the work of evangelization:

- i) The experience of syncretism and the need for deeper evangelization. It is true that like in many parts of the continent, the faith of the Christians is “skin deep”. In real life the faithful seem to be at crossroads between the Gospel values and their traditions. This impacts on their choices in life.
- ii) Apparent stronger tribal ties that lead to negative ethnicity. This has resulted into conflict and war in many of the countries. Since the Christian bonds are not very strong, Christians have participated in killing each other.
- iii) Polygamy is another major challenge. In many of the tribes that are found in Eastern Africa, polygamy is still held as a value. This impacts negatively on the work of evangelization. It is an obstacle to the reception of Sacraments and diminishes the dignity of women in society.
- iv) Another challenge is the negative influence that is caused by “modernity”. Since the formation of Christians in Catholic Social Teaching is not deep, many of the faithful, especially youth, are prone to the current trends in the contemporary society. Some of these trends are not in conformity with the Christian values.
- v) There is a recorded growth in the presence of Islam in the region. Baring in mind the effect of Islam on the beginnings of Christianity in Africa, there is every reason to give a concrete response to this.

3. Priorities in the Work of Evangelization Today

Having looked at the experiences and the challenges that affect the work of evangelization, I consider the following as key areas where the Church should focus:

- i) On-going Catechesis and Formation of the laity so that they can be empowered and play their part in the work of evangelization.
- ii) Given that many people are leaving in trauma which has resulted from conflict and war, the Church should focus on the ministry of reconciliation, justice and peace. This means that the resources of the Church should be channeled towards the implementation of the message of His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*.
- iii) Concrete efforts should be made to ensure that the Gospel message is truly incarnated in African life and culture.
- iv) Forums for exchange and sharing among the laity should be encouraged so that good practices can be learned and encouraged across the continent.
- v) The Council for Laity should be encouraged at all levels.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to encourage the laity by emphasizing that the work of evangelization is enormous and they should stand up and play their part. They should always know that they have an essential and irreplaceable role, that is, to announce and testify Jesus Christ Himself for He is the “good news” and the bearer of the joy that the Church announces each day and to whom the Church bears testimony before all people. Through the laity the Church is made present in the various sectors of the world as a sign and source of hope and love (*Christifideles Laici* No. 7).