

THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTIC AND UNDERLYING LOGIC OF AFRICAE MUNUS

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Abstract

Occasioned by the importance of the ecclesial reception of the post-synodal exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae munus* (2011), the article reflects on the theological hermeneutic and underlying logic of the document. By identifying a twofold hermeneutic framework consisting of the centrality of Christ and the understanding of the Church as the sacrament of peace, the author argues that reading the document from the above theological prism would be resourceful for articulating the promises as well as the challenges from the proposals and emphases enunciated by Pope Benedict to guide the church in Africa in its service to reconciliation, justice and peace as the light of the world and salt of the earth on the continent. Attempt is made to identify some of the promises and challenges. It acknowledges the theological appeal of the document's emphasis on metanoia as foundational to the different pathways and guidelines for persons and institutions in the Church. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this theological framework concerns how to concretely realise the Christ-centred vision of reconciliation, justice and peace of which the Church is unequivocally proclaimed as a sacrament. Besides, the article also calls attention to the risk of idealisation of the challenges. As a result, a case is made for interweaving conversion (holiness) with ethical imperatives and supportive ecclesial structures as well as the firm commitment to judiciously apply them transparently and accountably. The hermeneutic framework proposed for the reading of the document would definitely legitimate this. Lastly, a few concrete indications are offered for consideration.

Key words: Christ Christ-centeredness – Church – Sacramentality – Accountability and Transparency

Introduction

On November 19, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI officially released his post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the second special assembly of the synod of bishops for Africa (henceforth, African Synod II), at Ouidah in the Republic of Benin during his recent apostolic visit to that country. The synod was convoked by him and held in Rome from 4 to 25 October 2009 on the theme, *On the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* – “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:13-14). Characteristically, the post-synodal exhortation still retains this theme in its full title while at the same time an abbreviated title, *Africae munus*, is prefixed to it.

Drawn from its opening statement, namely “Africa’s commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ is a precious treasure...”¹ this abbreviated title sets the tone for the document’s important argument on the role of the Church in Africa as messenger and

¹ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa in the Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), §1. Literally, *Africae munus* means the service of Africa.

minister of reconciliation, justice and peace on the African continent – and by extension to the world at large. A twofold hermeneutical framework can be detected in *Africae munus*, one vertical and the other horizontal – the centrality of Christ and the sacramentality of the church respectively.² For, as the Pope emphasises: “True peace comes from Christ (cf. Jn 14:27). It cannot be compared with the peace that the world gives. It is not the fruit of negotiations and diplomatic agreements based on particular interests. It is the peace of a humanity reconciled with itself in God, a peace of which the Church is the sacrament.”³

I would want to argue in this paper that the above-stated theoretical framework constitutes an overarching interpretative key for understanding the important invitation issued by Pope Benedict to the Church in Africa at this critical period in the history of its various peoples and nation states.

It would suffice, given the limit of this article, to give a cursory overview of what I may loosely call a Christocentric thread that runs through the pages of the document, followed by the sacramentality aspect. Thereafter, I would examine the promises and challenges of this framework in the light of the church’s role in building sustainable reconciliation, justice and peace in the African context. Lastly, I would attempt to advance some critical questions which may not be unhelpful towards a fruitful post-synodal reception and implementation of *Africae munus* in a local context. Let me begin with a brief outline of its structure.

A Brief Structural Outline

Africae munus is composed of two main parts, distributed unevenly into five chapters with an introduction and a conclusion.

The introduction acquaints the reader with the focus of the exhortation. It briefly recapitulates, among others, the purpose for the convocation of the second synod for Africa, namely “to give a new impulse, filled with evangelical hope and charity, to the Church of God on the African continent and on the neighbouring islands.”⁴ It pays tributes to the synod fathers and other participants for the quality of their speeches at the assembly. It also highlights its link with the first synod for Africa (1994), “the most visible results,” of which, in the Pope’s judgement, were “exceptional ecclesial vitality and a theological understanding of the Church as God’s Family.”⁵ In the light of the

² It would be, to say the least, misleading to view these two aspects in parallel terms. To be sure, they are distinct and, therefore, neither identical nor interchangeable. Yet, they are not mutually exclusive. If anything, they are interwoven and mutually implicated. This is especially true in regard to the relation of the latter to the former.

³ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, §3.

⁵ *Ibid.* It is rather curious that the exhortation is silent about inculturation in this regard. Unarguably, if there was one theme that almost became synonymous with the memory of the first African synod, for good or bad, it was the emphasis on the need and urgency for inculturation of the Gospel message in Africa. The exceptional vitality was already common knowledge and experience long before that

latter, the exhortation highlights some of the pressing challenges facing the Church, Family of God in Africa – myriad forms of fratricidal conflicts, wars, marginalisation, natural and human-induced disasters and epidemics, etc. Evidently, these and similar malaises are, in their very nature, a contradiction to this very avowed identity and nature. Herein can be situated the relevance and urgency of a synod for Africa on the theme of reconciliation, justice and peace – and therefore of the gathering of its fruits by means of this exhortation.

The first part, “Behold, I Make All Things New” (Rev 21:15),” sets out in two chapters “the principle parameters of mission for an Africa that seeks reconciliation, justice and peace.”⁶ In its first chapter, these guidelines are concerned with what I may call the theological framework for the church’s “service to reconciliation, justice and peace.”⁷ An essential duty of the church is therefore highlighted, namely: “to bring the message of the Gospel to the heart of African societies”⁸ so that those who live by it are transformed into true witnesses.⁹ Among other things, it offers a theological clarification on the nature of the reconciliation, justice and peace at the heart of the church’s mission.¹⁰ It is to such a holistic vision that the following chapter passionately invites the church in Africa to tirelessly appropriate and show-forth in its leaders and members, under four broad pathways which incorporate both spiritual-sacramental as well as social components: 1) care for the human person;¹¹ living in harmony;¹² the African vision of life;¹³ and dialogue and communion among believers.¹⁴

The second part is titled, “To Each is given the Manifestation of the Spirit for the Common Good” (1 Cor 12:17).” It proposes an ecclesiological vision involving the whole church, working together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as an indispensable prerequisite for the realisation of the vision and pathways charted in the preceding part.¹⁵ Its first chapter¹⁶ addresses all members of the church. After a brief exhortation to all Christ’s faithful without distinction,¹⁷ attention is given to its different constituents in a descending order thus: bishops;¹⁸ priests [presbyters];¹⁹ missionaries;²⁰

synod. The issue rather was on how to deepen that vitality in the light of contemporary challenges such as gradual secularisation, aggressive neo-pentecostalism and the upsurge of sects, and dialogue with traditional religions, Islam, and other churches, etc.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §14

See *ibid.*, §§15-30. Cf. the caption of the chapter, “In Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, §15

⁸ I will return to this point below.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §§17-21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §§32-41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §§42-68.

¹² *Ibid.*, §§69-87.

¹³ *Ibid.*, §§88-96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, §97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §§99-131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, §99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §§100-107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §§113-114.

permanent deacons;²¹ consecrated persons;²² seminarians;²³ catechists;²⁴ and lay people.²⁵ Chapter two highlights major areas of apostolate through which the Holy Spirit guides the whole church as a community to exercise both the communal and the individual charisms of its members. The first to be highlighted in this regard is the Church as a sacrament of Christ's presence in the world.²⁶ Permit me to cursorily remark here that this serves to highlight an important theological and ecclesiological insight from the exhortation, which it seems to me gives further credence to the argument I want to elaborate regarding the two-fold hermeneutical framework for reading this document.²⁷ Others include: education;²⁸ health care;²⁹ information technology and communication.³⁰ In the third chapter (which is also the final chapter of the document) Pope Benedict XVI returns to some of the issues already mentioned in the previous chapters. It is directly captioned with Christ's declaration to the paralytic, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (Jn 5:8). He does this with an insightful biblical reflection on the episode at pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed a paralytic as recounted in the fifth chapter of John's Gospel. The text is prophetically applied to Africa. Like the paralytic, Africa, the pope emphasises, will attend holistic and lasting healing through accepting Christ and His salvific message.³¹ He therefore exhorts the church in Africa to take seriously the Sacred Scriptures;³² the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation;³³ and the imperative of the new evangelisation.³⁴

Finally, in the conclusion, Pope Benedict, once again reiterates the invitation to the Church in Africa to rise to the challenges of being the salt of the earth and light of the world as servant of reconciliation, justice and peace in an unfortunately fractious continent. This invitation implies a challenge towards new evangelisation understood as reconciliation.³⁵ The chapter's title, once again, is drawn directly from the Scriptures; this time, from Mark's account of the healing of blind Bartimaeus "Take heart; rise, He [Christ] is calling" (Mk 10:49). He also encourages "theologians to continue to probe the depths of the trinitarian mystery and its meaning for everyday African life,"³⁶ since as

²¹ *Ibid.* §§115-116

²² *Ibid.* §§117-120

²³ *Ibid.* §§121-124

²⁴ *Ibid.* §§125-127

²⁵ *Ibid.* §§128-131

²⁶ *Ibid.* §133

²⁷ I will return to this point below

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §§134-138

²⁹ *Ibid.* §§139-141

³⁰ *Ibid.* §§142-146

³¹ *Ibid.* §§147-149

³² *Ibid.* §§150-151

³³ *Ibid.* §§152-158

³⁴ *Ibid.* §§159-171

³⁵ *Ibid.* §§173-174

³⁶ *Ibid.* §172

he argues the above "summons will be vain unless it is rooted in the love of the Blessed Trinity."³⁷

Christ-Centredness

A Christocentric thread runs through *Africae munus*. The following can be highlighted among some of the important indicators in this regard: 1) the clarification on the nature of reconciliation; 2) the emphasis on Christ as its origin; and 3) the importance of conversion as a fundamental prerequisite for its attainment. Let me briefly explain how each of these is presented in the document.

Nature of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

Africae munus espouses an integral or holistic vision of peace. It integrates and holds in holistic balance the delicate tension involving justice, reconciliation, and love. A neglect of any of these three important ingredients vitiates the nature of human peace and therefore becomes defective not only by its nature, but above all in its efficacy and effectiveness. It therefore asserts: "Human peace obtained without justice is illusory and ephemeral. Human justice which is not the fruit of reconciliation in the 'truth of love' (Eph 4:15), remains incomplete; it is not authentic justice...A charity which fails to respect justice and the rights of all is false."³⁸ There is therefore interdependence between justice, love, and truth in the human search for lasting peace through reconciliation. Any neglect of any of this trio would not only render such initiative/pursuit inauthentic. It would, above all, also vitiate it; if not in the short, but definitely in the long term. This is all the more important especially in situations of egregious crimes (such as wars, genocides, etc.) against individuals, whole communities or peoples. Without any prejudice to the great potentials of what I may call *mere reconciliation* for overcoming crises and restoring people's dignity and creating space for lasting peace and development, the document is careful not to overlook the indispensability of the exercise of the requirements of justice. The prosecution and conviction of perpetrators and sponsors of such crimes would not only satisfy the victim's right to truth and justice; above all, it would also enhance the healing of memories and serve as a deterrent to others in both the present and the future. The pope's emphasis in this regard bears citing in greater details:

If it is to be effective, this reconciliation has to be accompanied by a courageous and honest act: the pursuit of those responsible for these conflicts, those who commissioned crimes and who were involved in trafficking of all kinds, and the determination of their responsibility. *Victims have the right to truth and justice. It is important for the present and for the future to purify memories, so as to build a better society where such tragedies are no longer repeated.*³⁹

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ *Ibid*, §18. See similar emphasis in Id., *Caritas in Veritate: On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth* (London, CTS, 2009), §§2-6.

³⁹ Id., *Africae munus*, §21, emphasis added.

The Church's apostolate in this regard is inspired by this vision in which reconciliation and justice can be seen as two prerequisites for lasting peace.⁴⁰ The reconciliation in question is constituted of both the divine-vertical and the human-horizontal aspects. It embodies a two-fold level. On the one hand, there is communion between God and humanity, and communion among human beings on the other. The former constitutes the ultimate foundation without which the latter would be anything but true and lasting. In other words, without reconciliation with God, there is no possibility of true reconciliation with others; for reconciliation with God both invites and challenges human beings to reconcile with themselves and with one another in view of evolving a new peaceful and just humanity. Consequently, the integrity and credibility of the former is measured by the latter. This holds true for both individuals and communities. The origin and inspiration of the vision offered here can only be found in God and sustained by his grace. "It is God's grace that gives a new heart and reconciles us with him and with one another."⁴¹

Christ: Origin and Model par Excellence of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace

Christ is the source of reconciliation, justice and peace. He does not only reconcile human beings with God and with one another; above all, he personifies this reconciliation in himself, in his life and ministry, and through his paschal mystery in particular. God's love, *Africae munus* explains, is the source especially of the divine-human reconciliation: "Christ re-established humanity in the Father's love. Reconciliation thus springs from this love; it is born of the Father's initiative in restoring his relationship with humanity, a relationship broken by human sin."⁴²

Christ's vision of peace, as emphasised in the Gospels, differs essentially from any secular paradigm. It is He who invites the Church to share in His ministry in this regard. Therefore the Christian apostolate of reconciliation, justice and peace is first and foremost a response to Christ's invitation. It is, indeed, a participation in and a perpetuation of the ministry of Christ in the world in view of the reign of God. Precisely as a calling by Christ, Africa's commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, to his teaching, and above all to his exemplary actions, is imperative for its effective exercise and fulfilment. Christ's becomes the perfect ideal for the Church's mission as witness and servant of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa. Consequently, Africa is called to imitate Christ by "*becoming just and building a just social order*" through, especially, "*living in accordance with Christ's justice,*" and "*creating a just order in the spirit of the beatitudes.*" Hence, *Africae munus* emphasises from its very onset: "Through this mission [commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ], Africa is led to explore its Christian

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, §17

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, §20

⁴² *Ibid.*

vocation more deeply: it is called, in the name of Jesus, to live reconciliation between individuals and communities and to promote peace and justice in truth for all.⁴³

The motif of Christ as *model par excellence*, which the church in Africa must follow in its apostolate of reconciliation, justice and peace, is also evident in the two main biblical symbols used in the document's title – as indeed in the synod's theme: *salt of the earth* and *light of the world*. The latter is elsewhere used in the New Testament by John the evangelist in reference to Christ⁴⁴ and to God.⁴⁵ Besides, it is particularly used by Christ at least twice in the Fourth Gospel in reference to himself. To his listeners, Jesus unequivocally declared: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:15). And similarly to his disciples: "As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world" (Jn 9:5). It may be pertinent to point out, even if only in passing, that there seem to be an overarching relevance of the context of these two passages vis-à-vis the context in which the Matthean passage is used in *Africae munus*. This is so particularly in regard to the first text. It is situated immediately after the episode of the liberating encounter with the woman brought to Jesus by the Scribes and Pharisees for committing adultery. She is forgiven, and reconciled with God and hopefully by her neighbours who, through Jesus's intervention are somehow forced, so to speak, to drop their earlier sentence against her. Evidently, this fits very well into the vision of reconciliation set forth in the document – the demands of justice is not overlooked (cf. "go and sin no more"). However, it is overtaken by the superabundance of God's love which redeems and sets free (cf. "nor do I condemn you"). The second text is situated within the context of the healing of the blind man. As the light of the world, Jesus shatters the darkness, thereby revealing his divinity (cf. Jn 1:4-5, 9; 1Jn 1:5).

Viewed from the above-mentioned christological context, the extension of the *light of the world* symbol in the Matthean text cited in *Africae munus*, to the disciples – and indeed to the whole church – theologically implies the Christ-rootedness of the *light* in question: "Christians who draw nourishment from the authentic source, Christ, are transformed by him into "the light of the world" (Mt 5:14), and they transmit the one who is himself "the Light of the world" (Jn 8:12)."⁴⁶ In other words, the church is not the *light per se*, though it reflects it. It is Christ who is *the light of the world par excellence* which the Church beams on the world as a witness.⁴⁷ Against this background, the symbol serves to reinforce the motif of Christ's centrality in the church's mission as witness and servant of reconciliation, justice and peace on the African continent. The

⁴³ *Ibid.*, §1

⁴⁴ See Jn 1:4-5, 9

⁴⁵ See 1Jn 1:5

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §95

⁴⁷ This idea will be further elaborated upon below in relation to the sacramentality of the church.

church's mission in this regard is and remains a participation in the life and mission of Christ.

In other words, the invitation to the Church in Africa become and always be "salt of the earth and light of the world," ultimately issues forth from Christ himself. Moreover, it is "through Christ and through the Holy Spirit" that this can be truly realised and lived out.⁴⁸ Besides, the biblical symbol, *light of the world*, applies to Christ himself. As a sacrament of Christ, the Church in Africa is therefore invited to imitate/follow the paradigm of Christ which is "the model *par excellence* underlying the Church's thinking and reasoning, which she proposes to all."⁴⁹ The first and fundamental step in that response consists in *metanoia*, conversion – a change of heart and life.

Conversion as Prerequisite

The emphasis on the importance of conversion as a fundamental step towards authentic reconciliation, justice and peace provides another angle for appreciating the centrality of Christ in the scheme charted by *Africae munus*. By its very nature, sin is a spiritual obstacle to reconciliation, justice and peace, and therefore an impediment to human and social growth and flourishing.

An insightful biblical theological reading of the episode of Jesus healing of the paralytic at the pool of Siloam is offered to demonstrate this: "Did not Christ say first of all to the paralytic: 'Your sins are forgiven' and then 'Rise' (Lk 5:20, 24)?"⁵⁰ Elaborating further, it adds: "He then removes the *spiritual obstacle* when he says to the paralysed man: 'Your sins are forgiven'. He removes what prevents the man from rising."⁵¹ It may be pertinent to note here a possible danger of reminiscent of the tendency common in Judaism up to the time of Jesus of a simplistic association of sickness with sinfulness. To be sure, the biblical reflection does evidently overlook that question. However, it does not seem to give any credence to it either. Instead, it is concerned in highlighting the implication of human concupiscence for individual and social wellbeing and development. Hence he makes the following candid acknowledgement: "...Christ calls constantly for *metanoia*, conversion. Christians are affected by the spirit and customs of their time and place. But by the grace of their Baptism they are called to reject harmful prevailing currents and to swim against the tide. This kind of witness demands unwavering commitment in 'ongoing conversion...'"⁵² As would be expected, the

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* §22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* §31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* §98.

⁵² *Ibid.* §32. In one of his works, Joseph Ratzinger describes conversion (*metanoia*) as a structure of faith. It relates it to both the Christian faith itself, and the commitment that it impels on adherents. For him, faith is structurally marked by *metanoia*, because it involves a radical *turning around* of the interior person from the self towards God. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary McCarthy (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1987), 55-60.

Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is strongly recommended: "Celebrated in faith, this sacrament has the power to reconcile us with God and with our neighbour."⁵³

To be sure, there are other obstacles to authentic reconciliation, justice and peace social, cultural, ideological, political, etc. Nonetheless, sin is almost always implicated in the very heart of each and every one of these otherwise non-spiritual dimensions of human life and society. Herein lays the fundamental link between sin and the different situations of injustices, marginalisation, wars, ethnic bigotry and mindless violence and killings, etc. that cry out for urgent and lasting resolution and foreclosure if the African continent must rise and walk towards the realisation of its full God-given potentials. Only God can remove this obstacle; indeed, this has been attained in and through Christ. However, we must make this redeeming action of Christ concrete in our lives. Of course, the role of the church is considered indispensable in this regard.

The Church as Sacrament of Peace

It is on the ecclesiological plain that we find perhaps the most challenging aspect of *Africae Munus*. It is true that it highlights different pathways and principles through, and with which the church responds to Christ's mandate and mission in furtherance of reconciliation, justice and peace. As briefly highlighted above, careful attention is given to all the members of the church, in their respective role in Christ's mission as well as to some important institutions through which the church carries out its divine mandate. However important these institutions have been, are, and may always be, the greatest challenge is laid on Christ's faithful themselves — bishops, presbyters, deacons, consecrated persons, catechists, laity, etc. — in their life of witnessing to Christ's Kingdom and its values. As explained above, on-going conversion, individually and collectively as well as institutionally is emphasised. Again, as acknowledged from the onset, the ecclesial dimension of the twofold theological hermeneutic discerned in the document is inseparable from its Christ-centredness. Perhaps nothing demonstrates this more than the affirmation that the church is *the sacrament* of Christ's peace.⁵⁴ In other words, the ecclesiological description of the church in sacramental terms in relation to its mission as both witness and servant of Christ's peace on the African continent theologically correlates the church with Christ and his ministry of reconciliation, justice and peace which is proposed as a *model par excellence* for the continent. It is pertinent to remark that the theological category of sacrament does not only seem effective in emphasising the church's role as set forth in the document. It seems also very resourceful in accentuating the challenges that issue therefrom with regard to the focus of the document.

⁵³ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §33.

⁵⁴ See *supra* n. 3.

In speaking about the church as *the sacrament of peace*, *Africae munus* evidently follows the fundamental insight espoused by Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.⁵⁵ Chapter one of the constitution clarifies the nature of the church as a mystery.⁵⁶ It begins by affirming that "Christ is the light of the nations."⁵⁷ This is followed by the description of the church as *a sort of sacrament*: "the church is in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity."⁵⁸ The centrality of Christ in this conciliar description of the church is unambiguous. Indeed, the three subsequent articles respectively links the church's being to the actions of the three divine persons in the trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ Evidently, the phrase *in Christo* emphasises the rootedness of the church's sacramental identity in Christ, while *veluti sacramentum* specifies the nature of that sacramentality.⁶⁰ In other words, the church is not a *kind of sacrament* on its own, but only insofar as it is in Christ; nor is it a sacrament in the strictly classical usage in relation to the seven sacraments. This means, as Joseph Ratzinger explains elsewhere: "The Church is the presence of Christ, the fact that he is contemporaneous with us..." "because Christ is the light of the Nations" there exists the mirror of his glory, the Church, that reflects his radiance."⁶¹ Appropriating this conciliar and sacramental terminology appears very resourceful in linking the church's mission on the African continent closely to Christ's. This, in turn, furnishes, among others, a robust framework for articulating the church's role on the African continent in a manner that seeks to maintain a *prophetic via media* between two extremes – namely, full political engagements on the one hand and silent apathy on the other.⁶²

Critical Re-Appraisal

So far, I have attempted to expatiate on what I consider the twofold theological hermeneutic framework within *Africae munus*, namely the centrality of Christ (Christocentricity) and the sacramentality of the church. I have attempted to show how this framework can be detected in the arguments and emphases advanced by the

⁵⁵ See Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, 31, n° 50. Reference is made to LG I.

⁵⁶ Cf. common etymological meaning of *mysterion* (Greek) and *sacramentum* (Latin).

⁵⁷ Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner, vol. 2 (London/Washington, DC: Sheed & Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990), §1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, §1; emphasis added.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, §§2-4.

⁶⁰ See Peter De Mey, "Church as Sacrament: A Conciliar Concept and Its Reception in Contemporary Theology," in *The Presence of Transcendence: Thinking 'Sacrament' in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Lieven Boeve and John Rijs (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 181-196; Avery Dulles, "Nature, Mission, and Structure of the Church," in *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition*, ed. Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26-27; Richard Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, ed. Christopher Bellitto, Rediscovering Vatican II (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2006), 43-44; Aloys Grillmeier, "The Mystery of the Church," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 1 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 139-140; Bernard Prusak, *The Unfinished Church: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004), 278-280.

⁶¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, trans. Robert Nowell (Middlegreen: St. Paul, 1988).

⁶² See also *id.*, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2005), 286-287.

⁶³ See Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §22.

document. In what follows I would attempt to re-examine some of the promises of this hermeneutic as well as some of the challenges that might attend it especially with regard to its concrete application. Let me begin with the first.

Some Promises

There is no doubt that much of the promise of this hermeneutic framework has already been hinted at, or at least implied in the above attempt at its elaboration. Significantly, I think – at least from a systematic theological point of view – that this twofold framework is very resourceful at least in two important ways. Firstly, it provides a robust theological grounding for a Christian understanding, so to speak, of reconciliation, justice and peace and, in turn, the church's role in its pursuit. Secondly, it also of course consequent upon the former – shapes the pathways, methods, as well as the emphases and goals proposed for the church on the African continent in its participation in the mission entrusted by Christ to the whole church.

To be sure, the church does not enjoy any monopoly over the many institutions that it employs in its exercise of Christ's mission of reconciliation, justice and peace. Educational healthcare, and media outfits are, unarguably, human and social institutions. Therefore, the church does not have exclusive claim to any of them; they also can and do exist and function successfully independently of the church in many places. In fact, the church's involvement in them is one of many other such involvements by the government as well as other bodies, both religious and secular. Still, in many places in Africa today, the church remains a pacesetter and unrivalled in the provision of healthcare and education to the generality of the populace. Its engagements in these apostolates are not merely humanitarian; they are a form of witnessing to Christ in the world. Therefore, by its involvement in them, the church accords these institutions its ecclesial identity. For example, with regard to healthcare institutions, the following directives are given:

*Health care institutions need to be managed in compliance with the Church's ethical norms, providing services which conform to her teaching and are exclusively pro-life. They must not become a source of enrichment for a few. The management of grant monies must aim at transparency and primarily serve the good of the sick. Finally each health care institution ought to have a chapel, the presence of which will remind all who work there (management, staff, physicians and nurses), as well as the sick themselves, that God alone is the Lord of life and death.*⁶³

⁶³ *Ibid.*, §141, emphasis added.

Of course, this identity, as explained above, is closely linked to Christ – indeed to the actions of the Trinity⁶⁴ – through whom the church derives both its being and mission and without whom it ceases to be what it is called to be, namely the light of the world and salt of the earth.

By linking these institutions – or more precisely the church's apostolate through them – closely to the mission of Christ and, by extension, of the church, it is not difficult to correlate the directive principles enunciated in the document for guiding the different institutions and their proper functioning to the church's teaching on the unicity and salvific universality of Christ and the church.⁶⁵ It may well be worth noting at least in passing that, as the then prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Pope Benedict XVI played a pivotal role in the clarification of this emphasis.⁶⁶ Why is this emphasis significant?

Given the plural character of the African continent, and especially the fact that indeed Catholics constitute a minority of its population, one might ask, wouldn't an emphasis on the centrality of Christ and the sacramentality of the church in the work of reconciliation, justice, and peace overly restrict the appeal of the document? What about other stakeholders in the African peace-project so to speak – other churches, Christian and non-Christian believers, and non-believers? This is, without doubt, an important concern. However, from point of view of Catholic theology, the hermeneutic framework rather than relativising does seem to give proper perspective to such concern. A cursory explanation may suffice.

There is no doubt that Catholics are the primary addressees of the document. Yet its subject matter and relevance transcend the different religious persuasions on the African continent, both indigenous and foreign. Hence, representatives of other non-Catholic groups, Christians and non-Christians, were invited to the celebration of the synod in Rome. Their contributions to the debates are also acknowledged. Besides, the document has called attention to the importance – in fact, the indispensability – of collaboration with these non-Catholic stakeholders in the realisation of Christ's mission to the Church in Africa. Hence it encourages both ecumenical and inter-religious as well as inter-cultural dialogues and engagements with other Christians, with non-Christians (especially African Traditional Religion and Islam), and with African cultures, respectively. The practical relevance of such dialogues and collaboration is almost self-evident. African history (like the world's in general), is replete with sad memories and experiences of ecclesially-, religiously-, and/or culturally-provoked, or motivated and/or aggravated violence, genocides and wars. Therefore, ecumenical, interreligious, and

⁶⁴ See *supra* n. 59. (Sic.)

⁶⁵ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "*Dominus Iesus*: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," *AAS* 92 (2000): 742-765.

⁶⁶ For a background and significance of the declaration, see his speech at the presentation of *Dominus Iesus* at a press conference in Rome (5 September 2000), in Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship*, 209-216.

intercultural dialogues and collaborations in truth and love do have huge potentials to overcome potential or actual clashes of churches, religions, and cultures that can undermine the church's efforts in witnessing to and serving Christ's peace on the continent. Nevertheless, *Africae munus* would not want to confuse the desirability and impetus for such dialogues and collaborations with a tacit endorsement of overlooking its theological and doctrinal claims about Christ and the church. In other words, it does not want Catholics to lose sight of the unique role of Christ and the church in this regard. Thus the twofold hermeneutic framework discussed above evidently provides Catholics a theological alibi, so to speak, against the danger of relativism and syncretism, without offending (hopefully) their non-Catholic collaborators. Above all, it seems it can also be very resourceful in clarifying why such collaboration would and may not vitiate the church's mission to evangelise and call people to faith in Christ.

Some Challenges

In the light of the theological hermeneutic framework proposed above for an understanding of the underlying logic of *Africae munus*, it would not be out of place to note that the document sets out an ideal after which the church in Africa must strive – and endeavour to make it a reality. Unfortunately, there is almost always a difference between *ideal and reality*. To my mind, I dare say this difference constitutes more of a challenge than an impediment to realising this ideal – or at least, and perhaps more precisely, striving after it.⁶⁷

In the light of the current situations of “*chaos, anarchy, and doom*”⁶⁸ in many places in Africa today, the challenges posed by *Africae munus* if viewed from point of view of the above-explained theological hermeneutic, would be as myriad as the varied situations in different places on the continent. Nonetheless, some common trajectories can still be charted. Moreover, the imperative and urgency for the church in Africa to walk its reconciliation, justice, and peace talk is unavoidably fundamental to any such challenges. In other words, for it to be a credible witness and servant to the above values, in fidelity to Christ's mandate and its self-understanding as a sacrament of peace, the church in Africa must not only practice what it preaches, but must also be seen and experienced as doing so.⁶⁹ In biblical terms, the church must first remove the planks in its eyes before it could see clearly the speck in the eyes of the wider society.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For insightful reflections on the synod, see also the following collections which were published before the release of *Africae munus*: Stan Ilo, Joseph Ogbonnaya, and Alex Ojacor, eds., *The Church as Salt and Light: Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, ed., *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace. The Second African Synod* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

⁶⁸ See Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *Prayer for Nigeria in Distress* (1993).

⁶⁹ For some compelling scholarly insights, see among others, James Keenan and Joseph Kotva Jr., eds., *Practice What You Preach: Virtues, Ethics, and Power in the Lives of Pastoral Ministers and Their Congregations* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

⁷⁰ See Mt 7:5; Lk 6:42.

It is worthy of note that the document has made a strong case for the cultivation and fostering of some important Christian dispositions, values and activities. These include, among others: 1) on-going conversion; 2) attentive listening to God through Sacred Scriptures, the teachings of the church in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching*, etc.; 3) devoted and sincere participation in the sacraments especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation; 4) building community and devotion to promoting the common good as family of God, etc. Unarguably, these are veritable means of conforming the church more closely to Christ and, therefore, making it more limpid in beaming Christ's light on the African continent. Nonetheless, so far, the document is evidently on an idealising terrain. Admittedly, the document unequivocally maintains that *metanoia* and communion with God are incomplete without a corollary re-establishment of communion with fellow human beings. Yet the apparent preponderance on spiritual means so to speak in this regard makes one wonder if the structural or institutional dimension of sin and/or conversion is not thereby overlooked. Much as the Sacraments (Reconciliation and Eucharist) would bring about the grace of on-going conversion and communion with God and with others, as argued in the document, they do not make up for veritable institutional measures and/or structures that would help sustain and promote human compliance. In this regard, I would think the document does not seem to take into much consideration, the reality of human incapacity and failure, and the necessity for institutional provisions that may at least ameliorate, if not completely overcome their inescapable effects. Let me attempt two cursory illustrations of this concern based on a concrete local context.

Bad governance and endemic culture of corruption have been identified among the prominent cankerworms ravaging most of African society, and therefore provoking and fuelling myriad forms of conflicts and violence in many parts of Africa today.⁷¹ Against this background, *Africae Munus* does well to exhort towards more responsible and accountable leadership – good governance in all tiers of public life. Curiously, however, it seems more persuasive when exhorting different sectors of the church towards this value than seems to be the case when addressing political leaders.⁷² Among

⁷¹ For a detailed examination, see Ignatius Edet, "The Church and Corruption in Africa," *AFER* 51/52 (2009/2010): 625-655. See also Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1984), esp. 37-43; Robert Calderisi, *The Trouble with Africa: Why Foreign Aid Isn't Working*, Paperback ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), esp. 77-99; Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, "Communiqué - Corruption in Nigeria: Implications for Nation Building," in *The Voice of the Voiceless: Pastoral Letters and Communiqués of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria 1960-2002*, ed. Peter Schineller (Ibadan: Daily Graphics, 2002), 394-399; Daniel Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁷² See Peter Henriot, "Steps Forward and Back," *The Tablet*, 3 December 2011, 12. Henriot was a theological adviser to the East African bishops at the synod in Rome. He expresses his frustration about what he calls a minimalising tendency? between *Africae Munus* and some of the perspectives espoused at the synodal discussions, or contained in its final message and propositions. With regard to the above, he remarks: "I could not help but contrast the *strong language on public leadership* in the message written by the synod bishops with the *more modest mention of selfish decision makers*, both political and economic, who think only of themselves" (emphasis added). See also, Gabriel Mmassi, "The Scourge of Corruption: The Need for Transparency and Accountability," in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace. The Second African Synod*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 226-237, esp. 226-227.

other instances.⁷³ it has this to say with regard to bishops and their administration of the church:

Dear brother bishops, following the footstep of Christ the Good Shepherd, be good pastors and servants of the flock entrusted to your care, exemplary in life and conduct. The good administration of your dioceses becomes models in the conduct of personnel, in transparency and good financial management. Do not hesitate to seek help from experts in auditing, so as to give example to the faithful and the society at large.⁷⁴

Indeed, the impact of a transparent and accountable ecclesial leadership for the credibility of the church's prophetic witness to the larger society cannot be overemphasised. But such exhortation, like the above, cannot achieve much without a corollary ethical imperative and adequate institutional framework to enforce this as a culture, especially given the reality of the on-going effect of original sin despite the redeeming grace of Christ's atonement mediated through the Sacrament of Baptism.⁷⁵ The inescapable question is: What happens if the bishop is – unfortunately – wanting in the virtue to uphold this value? Elsewhere, I have argued, *inter alia*, that current structures of accountability – and in particular the protocols for running them – are perhaps more fitting for angels. To say the least, they are highly pregnable to abuses since they do not provide for checks and balances in the proper sense of it.⁷⁶ Perhaps the African situation urgently requires more radical solution in the light of the Gospel. I will conclude with some tentative musings in this regard.

The first is more or less hypothetical – in relation to the Justice, Peace and Development Commission. In Nigeria, for instance, the JDPC is (at least supposedly) established at different levels of ecclesial configuration – station, parish, deanery, diocesan, provincial, and national. It has done enormous work of justice advocacy and, in collaboration with civil society groups, has distinguished itself in recent years in good governance and credible elections advocacy and monitoring. Curiously, I am unaware of any documented analogous role of the JDPC within the church itself.⁷⁷ Perhaps, urgent attention should be given to creating space for it and similar ecclesial organs in Africa to begin their work from within the church itself before reaching outward towards wider society. What difference would it have made? While I may not have any clear-cut answer, I would think the hermeneutic framework discussed here would indeed

⁷³ See *supra* in connection with the management of healthcare institutions by the church.

⁷⁴ Benedict XVI, *Africae munus*, §104.

⁷⁵ Cf. Richard Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers* (New York: Paulist, 2010). For a persuasive pastoral-ethical argument on the necessity of proper evaluation and monitoring of structures of accountability in the church to detect and punish defaulters, see Id., *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Paulist, 1996), 31-64; James Heft, "Accountability and Governance in the Church: Theological Considerations," in *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York: Continuum, 2004), 121-135.

⁷⁶ See Edet, "The Church and Corruption in Africa," 646-647.

⁷⁷ Cf. a more or less similar situation whereby, for many years, the principle of subsidiarity was strongly proposed in Catholic Social Teaching for governments and public organisations, but not for the church.

legitimate a situation whereby the JDPC, for instance, begins its highly commendable role *ad intra*. Secondly, the call to conversion seems to be preoccupied with individual conversion; at least the emphasis on the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist persuade along this understanding. The desirability or necessity of institutional acts of conversion does not seem to receive much, if any, attention. I would think a prophetic witness to deep institutional conversion would require a sincere acknowledgement of guilt by the church in Africa for past and present complicities, failures, or even outright perpetration of evils on the continent.⁷⁸ Besides, the proof of such conversion must also involve a commitment to transparent dealings especially with political and business leaders. Still on the questions of corruption, accountability, and transparency, commitment to *ethical funding*⁷⁹ is definitely imperative. The last, though not least, is largely an ethical-pastoral concern. What to do in situations of intra-ecclesial conflicts? Unfortunately, the document does not offer any binding guidelines about the necessity for such structures especially in the light of strong allegations of a culture of impunity and abuses of hierarchical authority by church leaders.⁸⁰ Would that the local churches in Africa will have the courage to extend the emphasis that reconciliation requires truth whereby perpetrators are brought to justice and the victims' right to the truth is upheld to processes of arbitration in matters involving the church or its officials with vulnerable members of the church and/or larger society.

Conclusion

I have proposed above a twofold theological hermeneutic consisting of the centrality of Christ and the sacramentality of the church, for reading Pope Benedict's post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Africae Munus*. This framework does not only clarify the divine-human aspects of reconciliation, justice and peace. It also reveals something of its eschatological character since, from a Christian perspective, true and lasting reconciliation, justice and peace is always ultimately the gift of God. This gift is present, yet not fully realised, in the here and now. It is always orientated towards God's Kingdom of justice, love, and peace. The church is not only at the service of that Kingdom in the here and now. It also makes it present however imperfectly, but in a manner unique to its identity and self-understanding as a sacrament of Christ's presence, of intimate communion with God and the unity of humanity. To sustain its sacramental identity and mission as light of the world and salt of the earth in its service to

⁷⁸ For a persuasive case with relevant literature review, see Raymond Aina, "The Mission of the Church in Africa Today: Reconciliation?," *AFER* 50 3 & 4 (2008): 218-265, esp. 255-258. See also Id, "The Second Synod for Africa and its Lineamenta. Questions and Suggestions," *AFER* 49 (2007): 155-183.

⁷⁹ By this I mean a clear commitment to fiscal policies informed by Gospel values to guarantee that donors (individuals or organisations) to ecclesial missions do not compromise justice, fairness, human dignity, and social responsibility. In other words, the church's fiscal policies must contain unambiguous commitment to screen out *tainted monies and wealth* despite their material expediency. For relevant discussion, see Russell Sparkes, *Socially Responsible Investment: A Global Revolution* (New York: Wiley, 2002), 55-56; Steven Tipton, *Methodist and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 284.

⁸⁰ Cf. John Beal, "It Shall Not Be So Among You: Crisis in the Church, Crisis in Church Law," in *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Catholic Church*, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York: Continuum, 2004), 88-102. For a very relevant and persuasive case, see Teresa Okure, "Church-Family of God: The Place of God's Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace," in *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod*, ed. Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 13-24.

reconciliation, justice and peace, the church must tread the path of integrity in its commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ who is its *model par excellence* through on-going *metanoia*, conversion. The guiding principles and pathways proposed by the document are based on this fundamental emphasis. Nevertheless, it does not seem the danger of idealisation is completely overcome in the proposals offered despite the acknowledgement of the frailty of the church and the challenges they constitute for its mission. As a result, I have proposed that concrete ethical imperatives and structures must be strengthened where they already exist or evolved where there might be none to enhance a credible application of the ideals proposed to the church in Africa. In other words, commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, through conversion, holiness, fidelity to the doctrinal and social teachings of the church, prophetic witness through formation of conscience, advocacy and charitable works, etc., must be complemented with firm ethical framework and institutions, but never replaced by the latter. As J. Heft rightly remarks, "Fidelity [holiness] and supportive structures ought to be woven together."⁸¹ This is perhaps the most important challenge for the different local churches on the continent towards a prophetic reception and application of not only the post-synodal exhortation but the entire second synod for Africa itself.

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⁸¹ Heft, "Accountability and Governance in the Church," 123.

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