



The Holy See

EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION FOR THE OPENING
OF THE SECOND SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR AFRICA
OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS **HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI**

Vatican Basilica

Sunday, 4 October 2009

[Images of the celebration](#)

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Pax vobis peace to you! With this liturgical greeting I address you all, gathered in the Vatican Basilica, where 15 years ago, on 10 April 1994, the Servant of God John Paul II opened the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. The fact that today we are here to inaugurate the Second one means that it was indeed a historic event, but not an isolated one. It marked the arrival point of a journey that subsequently continued and is now reaching a significant new milestone in the process of assessment and relaunching. Let us praise the Lord for this! I address my most cordial welcome to the Members of the Synod Assembly who are concelebrating this Holy Eucharist with me, with the Experts and with the Auditors, and in particular to those who come from Africa. I extend a special greeting to the General Secretary of the Synod and his collaborators. I am very happy to have with us His Holiness Abuna Paulos, Patriarch of the Orthodox Tewahedo Church of Ethiopia, whom I warmly thank, and the Fraternal Delegates of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I am also glad to greet the Civil Authorities and Ambassadors who have wished to take part in this celebration; I greet with affection the priests, the men and women religious, the representatives of organizations, movements and associations, and the Congolese Choir which, together with the Sistine Chapel Choir, is enlivening our Eucharistic Celebration.

The biblical Readings of this Sunday speak of marriage. However, more radically, they speak of the design of Creation, of the origins and hence, of God. The Second Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews confirms this design, where it says: "For he who sanctifies", namely Jesus Christ, and "those who are sanctified", that is, human beings, "have all one origin". "That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Heb 2: 11). Thus the primacy of God the Creator visibly stands out in both Readings, with the eternal validity of his original imprint and the absolute priority of his lordship, that lordship which children can welcome better than adults; for this reason Jesus holds them up as a model for entering the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mk 10: 13-15). Now, recognition of the absolute lordship of God is certainly one of the salient and unifying features of the African culture. There are of course many different cultures in Africa but they all seem to agree on this point: God is the Creator and the source of life. Now life as we well know is essentially expressed in the union between the man and the woman and in the birth of children; the divine law, written into nature, is therefore stronger and pre-eminent with respect to any human law, according to Jesus' clear and concise affirmation: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mk 10: 9). Thus the perspective is not primarily moral: it concerns being, the order inscribed in creation, before duty.

Dear brothers and sisters, in this regard beyond the first impression today's liturgy of the Word appears particularly suited to accompanying the opening of a [Synodal Assembly dedicated to Africa](#). I would like to stress in particular certain aspects that emerge forcefully and call into question the work that awaits us. The first, already mentioned: the primacy of God, Creator and Lord. The second: marriage. The third: children. As regards the first aspect, Africa is the depository of a priceless treasure for the whole world: its profound sense of God, which I have been able to perceive first hand at my meetings with the African Bishops on their *ad limina* visits, and especially during my recent Apostolic Visit in Cameroon and Angola, of which I retain pleasant and moving memories. It is precisely this pilgrimage to Africa that I would now like to recall, because during those days [I opened this Synod Assembly](#) in spirit by presenting the [Instrumentum Laboris](#) to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences and the Heads of the Synods of Bishops of the Eastern Catholic Churches.

When Africa's treasures are mentioned one immediately thinks of the abundant riches of the territory which have unfortunately become and continue to be a cause of exploitation, conflict and corruption. The Word of God, instead, makes us look at another patrimony: the spiritual and cultural heritage, which humanity needs even more than raw materials. "For what does it profit a man", Jesus was to say, "to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mk 8: 36). From this viewpoint Africa constitutes an immense spiritual "lung" for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope. But this "lung" can also become ill. And at this moment at least two dangerous pathologies are infecting it: in the first place, a disease that is already widespread in the Western world, in other words practical materialism, combined with relativist and nihilistic thought.

Without discussing the genesis of such sickness of the spirit, it is nevertheless indisputable that

the so-called "first" world has sometimes exported and is exporting toxic spiritual refuse which contaminates the peoples of other continents, including in particular the population of Africa. In this sense, colonialism finished at a political level has never really ended. But, precisely in this perspective, a second "virus" should be pointed out that could strike Africa too, that is, religious fundamentalism, combined with political and economic interests. Groups that relate to various religious affiliations are spreading on the African continent; they do so in the name of God but according to a logic opposed to divine logic, in other words, not by teaching and practicing love and respect for freedom but rather by intolerance and violence.

As regards the subject of marriage, the text of chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis has recalled the perennial foundation that Jesus himself confirmed: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gn 2: 24). How is it possible not to recall the wonderful cycle of catecheses that the Servant of God John Paul ii dedicated to this subject, based on a particularly deeply studied exegesis of this biblical text? Today, in proposing it to us again at the opening of the Synod, the liturgy offers us the superabundant light of the truth revealed and incarnate in Christ with which it is possible to consider the complex topic of marriage in the African ecclesial and social context. On this point too, however, I would like briefly to mention a thought that precedes any reflection or indication of a moral order, and which is nevertheless still connected to the primacy of the meaning of the sacred and of God. Marriage, as the Bible presents it to us, does not exist outside the relationship with God. Conjugal life between a man and a woman, and hence the life of the family that results from it, is inscribed in communion with God and, in the light of the New Testament, becomes an icon of Trinitarian Love and the sacrament of Christ's union with the Church. To the extent in which it preserves and develops its faith, Africa will be able to draw on immense resources for the benefit of the family founded on marriage.

Furthermore, by including in the Gospel passage the text on Jesus and the children (Mk 10: 13-15), the liturgy invites us from this moment to bear in mind in our pastoral concern the reality of children who constitute a great and unfortunately often suffering part of the African population. In the scene where Jesus welcomes the children, even indignantly opposing the disciples who sought to keep them away from him, we see the image of the Church which in Africa, and in every other part of the earth, expresses her own motherhood especially to the smallest ones, even when they are not yet born. Like the Lord Jesus, the Church does not see them principally as recipients of assistance and even less of pietism or exploitation but rather as people in every sense, who through their own way of being show the main road by which to enter the Kingdom of God, the road, that is, of unconditional entrustment to his love.

Dear Brothers, these indications that come from the Word of God fit into the broad horizon of the Synodal Assembly that is beginning today and that is the follow-up of the former Synod dedicated to the African continent, whose fruits were presented to Pope John Paul II, of venerable memory, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. Although the first duty of evangelization remains

valid and timely, there is need of a new evangelization that takes into account the rapid social changes of our epoch and of the phenomenon of world globalization. The same can be said of the pastoral decision to build the Church as God's family (cf. *ibid.*, n. 63). In this broad wake comes the Second Assembly whose theme is: "The Church in Africa at the service of reconciliation, justice and peace: "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world' (Mt 5: 13, 14)". In recent years the Catholic Church in Africa has experienced great dynamism and the Synodal Meeting is an opportunity to thank the Lord. And since the growth of the ecclesial community in all fields also entails challenges *ad intra* and *ad extra*, the Synod is a favourable moment for rethinking pastoral activity and renewing the thrust of evangelization. In order to become the light of the world and the salt of the earth it is therefore always necessary to aim at the "high standard" of Christian living, in other words, at holiness. Pastors and all the members of the ecclesial community are called to be holy; the lay faithful are called to spread the fragrance of holiness in the family, in the work place, at school and in every other social and political context. May the Church in Africa always be a family of authentic disciples of Christ where the difference between ethnic groups becomes a cause and an incentive for reciprocal human and spiritual enrichment.

With her work of evangelization and human advancement, the Church can certainly make a great contribution in Africa to the whole of society which, unfortunately, is experiencing poverty, injustice, violence and war in various countries. The vocation of the Church, a community of people who are reconciled with God and with one another, is that of being a prophesy and a leaven of reconciliation between the different ethnic, linguistic and even religious groups, within single nations and throughout the continent. Reconciliation, a gift of God that men and women must implore and receive, is a stable basis on which to build peace, an indispensable condition for the authentic progress of people and of society, in accordance with the project of justice wanted by God. Open to the redeeming grace of the Risen Lord, Africa will thus be illuminated increasingly by his light and, letting itself be guided by the Holy Spirit, will become a blessing for the universal Church, making its own qualified contribution to building a more just and fraternal world.

Dear Synod Fathers, thank you for the contribution that each one of you will make to the work in the coming weeks, which will be for us a renewed experience of fraternal communion that will redound to the benefit of the whole Church, especially in the context of the Year for Priests. And I ask you, dear brothers and sisters, to accompany us with your prayers. I ask it of those present: I ask it of the cloistered monasteries and religious communities scattered throughout Africa and in other parts of the world, of the parishes and movements, of the sick and the suffering: I ask all to pray that the Lord may make this Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops fruitful. Let us invoke upon it the protection of St Francis of Assisi whom we are commemorating today, that of all the African Saints and, in a special way, that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Our Lady of Africa. Amen!

