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No Lid Put on this Bubbling Pot – The Papal Audit the World Church: Africa

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While the Catholic Church suffers decline in Europe, in the developing world it is thriving. The fourth in our series on the state of Catholicism examines Africa, where the Church plays a key role in providing vital services but faces constant opposition from terrorists

For good or for ill, Africa is always in the news. Notice how the dramatic announcement of Pope Benedict's resignation immediately thrust leading African churchmen into the media limelight as papabili. This time of transition is an appropriate moment for a sustained reflection on the state of the Catholic Church in sub-Saharan Africa.

Writing about this highly stereotyped continent is a formidable task. The media mix facts with myths to concoct a confusing picture of political putrescence and economic renaissance, a continent poised between cultural decadence and religious effervescence, with neither the capability to overcome the former nor the will to consolidate the latter. We should be cautious before making generalisations about Africa. I start with a modest premise: in Africa, religion is real and the Church is alive. Worship, celebration and religious ritual are an essential part of everyday life. The broader implication of this inclination towards religious practice is a demographic windfall that favours all Churches and religious communities, including the Catholic Church. The growth and the values of African Christianity hold significant promise for the Universal Church, a fact that has been recognised at the highest level. John Paul II and Benedict XVI were familiar figures in Africa, the former especially. On every visit they affirmed and celebrated the vibrancy of Christianity in Africa. In an address given in Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1980, John Paul II declared: "Africa constitutes a real treasure-house of so many authentic human values." On the occasion of the second African

Synod in 2009, Benedict XVI coined a striking metaphor, characterising Africa as the "spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope". John Paul and Benedict shared the perspective of Paul VI, the first Pope to visit modern Africa, who delivered the famous challenge to its people: "You may, and you must, have an African Christianity."

The global importance of Catholic Christianity in Africa today is undeniable: it sits on an axis of demographic growth, religious flourishing and increasing sociopolitical relevance. Recent official statistics showing a steady and impressive annual growth in the number of Catholics in Africa are not just lifeless figures. The vital contribution made by the Church to Africa can be seen in health care, education, development, income generation and empowerment. In each of these areas the Church is a clear leader in providing services, particularly where government support is inadequate or non-existent. Three events illustrate the Church's major role in Africa's recent history.

First, in the immediate post-independence era several African governments opted to nationalise educational institutions, which had largely been under the control of the Church. The consequences were disastrous. Fortunately, over the years, Catholic institutions and communities have increased their participation and reasserted their influence in education at all levels. Secondly, the HIV/Aids pandemic that peaked in the late 1980s left the continent's meagre public-health facilities dangerously stretched. In response, several Catholic institutions, especially communities of women Religious, pioneered programmes that were to prove effective in combating the disease, through education for life, homebased care, the care of orphans and vulnerable children, the prevention of mother-to-child transmission, and income generation schemes. Thirdly, during the wave of democratisation that swept across several countries in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, Catholic leaders were often the preferred candidates to lead and facilitate national conferences that ushered in political transition.

The Catholic Church's long tradition of involvement in education and care of the sick attests to its influence and its contribution to the development of the continent. Whatever is said about the ills and shortcomings of missionary Christianity, it has been a catalyst for

growth through the spread of literacy and health care. The Catholic Church was and remains the educator and nurse of the continent. The huge numbers of Religious women and men in religious life guarantee that this unofficial status will be maintained for a long time to come.

In sub-Saharan Africa, seminaries and religious communities recruit vocations in droves, the complete reverse of what we see in the secularised West. There are anecdotes of overwhelmed seminary rectors having to use photo albums to help them identify the candidates under their charge. Sociologists and theologians offer different explanations for this trend. Some see it as driven by a desire for upward social mobility, others as a manifestation of the near-innate religious constitution of the African, or as proof of the successful local appropriation of the tenets of Christianity. Interestingly, the present boom in vocations has contrived to produced a reverse missionary flow. Several dioceses and religious congregations in Africa have agreed formal pacts with counterparts in Europe or North America to supply personnel for parishes, schools and nursing homes.

This reverse evangelisation should be treated with a dose of realism. The motivation is often as much economic as it is missionary. Remittances from overseas missionaries offer a vital financial lifeline to resource-strapped local dioceses and religious congregations. While this is a very different scenario from the current trend of northward economic migration, the resemblance is striking.

There is an African proverb that "a good okra sauce cannot be confined to the cooking pot". Sooner or later, the fire beneath it will cause it to bubble over. The Church in Africa is not an isolated reality. It is a myth to imagine there could be a self-contained local Church in any part of the world immune to the effects of globalisation and the vicissitudes and crises that are impacting on the Church elsewhere. The contentious issues that are a challenge to the Church at a global level have not bypassed Africa and surreptitious attempts to suppress, circumvent or deny them are as futile as a cook trying to keep the lid on a boiling pot of okra sauce. A few random examples come to mind.

First, there is the growing access to theological education and the increased involvement in theological debate by African women. This trend is allowing women to contest once sacrosanct conservative doctrinal positions and gender-biased ways of understanding ministry,

status, participation and decision-making in the Church. These African women take seriously the mandate of the second African Synod that called them to assume their responsibility and "full place" in ministry and ecclesial life with equality and dignity. Secondly, the HIV/Aids pandemic has sundered the veil of silence over morally contentious means of HIV prevention, often dividing hierarchical leadership and empowering the faithful to take responsibility in conscience for matters of sexual ethics, marriage, divorce, family and reproductive health. Thirdly, alarmingly, in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa, sometimes buoyed by intemperate doctrinal assertions and the careless rhetoric of politicians and church leaders, vigilante groups hunt down gays and lesbians and hurl them before magistrates for conviction and confinement in jail. Fourthly, although reported as isolated incidents, cases of clergy sex abuse find more and more space in the public media. Fifthly, the considerable growth in vocations is straining the limited capacity of formation personnel, spawning questions regarding the quality and depth of formation of future priests and Religious. Finally, in Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and other countries, Christianity is caught in a spiral of bloody conflict with militant Islam, leaving a trail of death and devastation. Catholics are particularly vulnerable because their large seasonal liturgies during Easter and Christmas provide terrorists with soft targets to ply their ghastly trade. Faced with this growing Islamic fundamentalism, victims of religious violence question the adequacy of the Catholic Church's current approach. The theologically complex question is how to balance commitment to inter-religious dialogue and tolerance with the defence of the rights of Catholics to practise their faith without fear or hindrance.

This is only a partial account of a Church that is struggling with difficult issues in the midst of religious flourishing, while needing visionary and focused leadership. Each of these neuralgic issues calls for an African Church courageously attuned to the voice of the Spirit and schooled in the art of discerning the signs of the times to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches and to act accordingly. The time of papal transition is opportune for envisaging this kind of leadership. Yet there is little doubt too that the Church in Africa bears gifts and values that can reinvigorate and oxygenate a world Church under siege from secularism and relativism.

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