

## AFRICAN PALAVER SERIES

### *Call to action*

#### **Introduction**

Participation in last Friday's African Palaver Series raised some very fond memories of the two Special Sessions of the Synod of Bishops for Africa in 1994 & 2009.

Those Synods left an indelible mark on the mind and heart of most participants, not least the two Popes involved - St John Paul II and Benedict XVI. They often made fond references to the Church in Africa coming of age in itself and holding out the torch of hope to the universal Church.

For me those two Synods marked the coming of age of many African Church Leaders themselves, especially in the courage which they showed by defining the Church which they were leading in a way that show how it would reflect their dreams and aspirations, but also the realities from which that Church was emerging in the different countries and peoples in which it was increasingly a force for good, not only for Africa but in the world.

That was summed up for me by the description they, the Bishops, gave of the Church they were leading: *We, Church in Africa, are the "Family of God in Africa"*.

This catch phrase contains and reveals a multitude of extremely rich ideas for reflection; challenges to be taken up and ideals to be striven for.

The first focal point is "We, the Church in Africa". Note that it is the Church in Africa, not the Church of Africa or the African Church, as if the Church which we are is confined to Africa! No! This is the Church of Christ in Africa; Christ being manifested by the People of Africa who are his members. Christ in Africa, its countries and its People.

The second focal point is the Family. For most Africans the Family is still **the** central feature and value of society, be it the clan or the tribe. The Family defines who we are, what we aspire to be, how we are going to achieve what we are born to be. In this case, our objective is to be the Family of God!

The third focal point is God. We are not seeing ourselves only as of the Family of Man, or even of this or that ethnic, cultural or tribal group, but "of God". This is the Core of who and what we are. We are of God, therefore we have to look elsewhere than society or the community in which we live, to find where we really "live and move and have our being!"

By being Church, we are assigned to a higher ground, to God because that's where we really live and move and have our being ... For we are indeed his offspring.

The two Synods on Africa have much to teach us, to challenge us and to confirm us in believing and doing. But given the present state of the world, I believe this is where we must focus all our attention - on how we truly become and live and move and have our being in today's world, so as to be truly "The Family of God in Africa and Beyond!"

In the world of today the biggest and most serious crisis is precisely in the Family. It starts with the all out attack on Marriage, which is the basic and most fundamental element of human society. It goes further with its sustained assault on the Family by trying to deprive it of its most basic rights and duties. We see this in the key areas of procreation, the nurturing and education of children. In our eyes, children are willed by God to be **the** creatures whom he wants to be most like him, indeed his own image and likeness!

If there is anything which I would love to see the African members and delegates at the Synod doing, it is that they take every opportunity to be radical images of God, who mirror God to others, by reflecting what it means to be full members of the Family of God, precisely because they are from Africa.

Both Pope John Paul 2 and Pope Benedict made a special point of underlining the fact that the two sessions of the Synod for Africa were occasions when the whole Church was engaged in prayerful reflection on what the Church in Africa is able to contribute most effectively, namely, how to be the Family of God at a time when the Family of Man is in deep crisis!

By the same token, the theme identified by Pope Benedict "The Church in Africa, in the service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace", was equally prophetic when we consider what is going on today, in Africa but also elsewhere.

My dream is that what the Church learned from the the Synods on Africa will help to turn it around in those nations and countries which were once called Christian countries because they lived and moved and had their being in God through his Church. What wealth of culture! What depth of spirituality! What amazing progress, the Church brought into those countries and their cultures. Why can't it do the same in Africa?

The Church in Africa has a huge responsibility to reach out to the Church in the West and show it how it too can become once again the "Family of God!"

Dixi! Gratias!

Cardinal Wilfrid Napier OFM