Vatican



Ethiopian Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa checks out the name badge of Nathanael Lamataki, a youth delegate from the French territory of New Caledonia in the South Pacific, as they leave a session of the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment at the Vatican Oct. 5. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — October 12, 2018
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

One of the African prelates taking part in the Catholic Synod of Bishops on young people says he hopes the gathering will address the stark realities of poverty, migration, and conflict being experienced by youth on his continent.

"The question … in Africa for the youth is not what we talk [about] much here in the synod," Ethiopian Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel told NCR.

"The real question is survival," Souraphiel said in an Oct. 11 interview. "In [the] African context, it is survival: what you have to eat, to dress, and whether you get shelter."

"The modern challenges we hear, say from Europe or the Americas, about loneliness, about suicide or drugs, and generational differences between young people and the elders … that's not happening there," he said.

"The Catholic youth, they like their church; they come to their church," he said. "The difficulty is what happens after church."

Souraphiel, who is attending the Oct. 3-28 synod in at least three different roles, spoke in a half-hour conversation at the Vatican's Domus Sanctae Marthae.

The prelate, who was made a cardinal by Pope Francis in 2015, heads the archdiocese of Addis Ababa, is the president of the Episcopal Conference of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and is also president of the Council of the Ethiopian Church.

Souraphiel focused the interview on the perspectives he is carrying with him from young people across eastern Africa. He also spoke about the atmosphere inside the meeting hall during the synod's discussions, and expressed his appreciation for Francis' "approach to the social questions" of our era.

He said the 267 prelates and 72 auditors taking part in the synod recognize that the situation of young people varies in different parts of the world.

"They have different issues which they face," said Souraphiel. "You cannot speak about one 'youth.' You have to differentiate. And that is good for the Catholic Church

because the Catholic Church is universal and is diverse, so we get information from all parts of the world — the aspirations, and the anxieties, the challenges which the youth are facing."

Among experiences he listed as being faced by African youth are poverty, especially in rural areas; migration, both within and outside the continent; human trafficking; and the prevalence of the illegal arms trade.

"There is unrest, there is civil war, there is ethnic strife … because of a lack of good governance in the African countries," said Souraphiel. "Because there is lack of good governance, we also have corruption. So the issues become complex."

"One of them would be the arms trade," he explained, saying that "lots of arms are arriving into Africa from all corners of the world" and include "very sophisticated and modern weapons" that are put to use by guerilla groups.

"The different liberation movements employ youth to be soldiers," he said. "So, there are child soldiers, youth soldiers, girl soldiers, and a lot of sad situations."

"You can ask: who is profiting from this?" he said. "You know somebody is profiting from this situation."

Advertisement

In regards to migration, Souraphiel said he wished the African church had the resources to better prepare young people moving abroad for work, and mentioned particularly young women who go to the Middle East for domestic labor.

He pointed to the example of the Filipino church, which he said is able to help train young people before they leave their country.

"Ours, they just go without preparation, some even below age," he said. "They just get the passport falsely. A girl of 16 or 17 could say she is 24 or 25 and she just goes … and is free for exploitation."

"If we could train them within the country before they leave, prepare them, it would be a big assistance for the youth," he said. "Then they would be able to go with confidence, and help themselves and help their families."

Asked to evaluate Francis' five-year papacy, Souraphiel said he thought the pontiff has done "very well" and is liked in Africa as "a pope who is very close to migrants and refugees and the poor."

"I think because of his listening to the people, and not judging anyone but being near to the people, he has been one of the moral voices in the world," he said. "And many appreciate him."

Souraphiel noted that Francis has been arriving at the synod hall early each morning and afternoon to greet people and said the pope "doesn't miss anything" in the discussions.

"I think he likes it," he said. "The whole idea of the synod is to be with the Holy Father, and, together with him, look for solutions — and also, with him, to pray about it."

"Sometimes in the free discussion time he intervenes," said Souraphiel. "He sees what points he has been touched by. So he is just like any other participant."

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story appears in the **Synod on the Youth 2018** feature series. View the full series.