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Pope unveils African Synod preparation paper

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While some Catholics in the West seem entirely comfortable fighting the church's internal culture wars featuring endless rows over liturgy, doctrine, and authority others have long breathed a weary sigh about such matters, regarding preoccupation with them mostly as an exercise in navel-gazing.

That kind of Catholic is generally more interested in changing the world rather than tinkering with the church.

For anyone who feels that way, the instrumentum laboris, or "working paper," for the upcoming Synod for Africa, presented by Pope Benedict XVI today in Cameroon, will likely come as a massive breath of fresh air. In ecclesiastical language, the working paper is a deliberately ad extra document, concentrating on how the gospel message can transform the broader culture.

Speaking of the church in Africa, the working paper declares that "she ought not to retire into herself," and calls for a "more prophetic role" in the social and political life of the continent.

The official theme of the synod, set for October in Rome, is "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace," setting a tone that runs through the 62-page document. While there is passing mention of more internal questions such as Eucharistic adoration, the overwhelming thrust is to marshal the church's resources to end war and to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in African societies, as well as to carve out more just relationships with the outside world.

October's synod is styled as a follow-up to the first Synod for Africa, which took place in 1994. Coincidentally, the synod met in Rome just as genocidal violence began to explode in Rwanda a harrowing reminder of the threats to peace and stability on the continent, as well as the limits of the

church's capacity to influence events. (Prior to the genocide, an estimated 62 percent of Rwanda's population of 7.8 million was Catholic.)

Although the pope presented the working paper today, in reality it's less his voice expressed in its pages than that of the African church. The instrumentum laboris was prepared by a commission composed largely of African bishops, and it expresses the agenda of the African church for the synod.

'Seen among the vast numbers of the elect are infirm, the poor, the enslaved, widows, foreigners, migrants and persons on the periphery of African society,' the document says. 'These are the very recipients of God's preferential love, so much so that the Lord Jesus identifies himself with them.'

The document calls the church in Africa to a 'mission of peace,' asserting that 'this mission has never been more timely in Africa, because of her conflicts, wars and violence.'

(According to the United Nations, out of 13 million deaths in large-scale conflicts around the world since 1994, more than 9 million have come in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent is also home to several million refugees and internally displaced persons, according to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees.)

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An illustrative, but by no means exhaustive, list of matters the working paper wants the synod to tackle includes:

'Greed, corruption and the allurements of gain.' (The African Union estimates that pervasive corruption in many states costs Africa an average of \$150 billion every year, equivalent to one-quarter of Africa's total Gross Domestic Product.)

- Human rights and democracy
- 'Globalization,' which, the working paper asserts, 'is tending to marginalize Africa.'
- The family
- The dignity of women, and contemporary threats to that dignity 'including 'problems of inheritance and rites of widowhood, sexual mutilation, forced marriages and polygamy.'
- Ethnocentrism, xenophobia and tribal and regional conflict
- Low prices for indigenous products, difficult obtaining credit for small and micro-businesses, a lack of infrastructure and decent roads, growing unemployment, and the phenomenon of 'wage slavery'
- Urbanization and the depopulation of rural areas
- Growing crime
- Exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of elites
- Climate change and the environment
- The financial crisis and international economic structures
- Violence and war, and the arms trade
- The death penalty, torture, and delays in the justice system
- Witchcraft and superstitious forms of religion
- Support for farm workers and opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs)

One clear emphasis of the document is that the church's contribution to tackling these problems should not be simply a matter of bishops' conferences issuing statements, but also that lay faithful working in politics, finance, and other sectors ought to transform African societies from the inside out.

To be sure, all this activism is grounded in a spiritual frame of reference. The working paper acknowledges that the ultimate basis for the ills of African societies, as in other parts of the world, is 'the wounded human heart.' Pastoral efforts aimed at individual conversion and holiness, it says, therefore remain an indispensable priority.

Nonetheless, the list above is more than enough to make the point that the Synod for Africa seems destined to have a horizon that extends well beyond the four walls of the church sacristy.

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John Allen is in Africa covering Pope Benedict XVI's March 17-23 trip to Cameroon and Angola. Watch the NCR web site for his daily reports.

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