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Obama's election a 'divine sign,' African bishop tells synod

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 6, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
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tBarack Obama?s election as the first African-American President of the United States could be interpreted as a ?divine sign,? according to a senior African prelate, suggesting that in God?s plan for salvation history, 500 years of slavery and racial oppression may be giving way to a new era of reconciliation.

tThe comments came yesterday afternoon from Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of the Democratic Republic of Congo, as part of the Synod of Bishops for Africa meeting in the Vatican Oct. 4-25.

tMonsengwo called on the synod and the universal church not to ?ignore? the significance of Obama?s election, which he said was the result of much more than ?a banal game of political alliances.?

tMonsengwo has long been seen as the more impressive Catholic bishops in Africa, and yesterday delivered a formal report on trends in the church since the last Synod for Africa in 1994.

In that context Monsengwo argued that the election of an Africa-American in the United States could offer a ?hermeneutic key? to reading the last five decades of global history, especially the slave trade and its aftermath.

t?If the election of a black as head of the United States of America was a ?divine sign? and ?a sign from the Holy Spirit for the reconciliation of races and ethnic groups, for peaceful human relations ..." Monsengwo said, ?this Synod and the universal church would gain from not ignoring this primordial event of contemporary history, which is far from being a banal game of political alliances.?

tThis morning, the synod began with an ecumenical touch: an address from His Holiness Abune Paulos, Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia. Paulus processed into the synod hall this morning in the company of Pope Benedict XVI, was seated next to the pope, and delivered his remarks as the morning?s first order of business.

tPaulos recalled the long history of Christianity in Ethiopia, including its tradition of martyrdom. (Paulos himself had been imprisoned in the 1970s under Ethiopia?s Communist military junta.)

tThe Orthodox patriarch then called upon Africa?s various Christian churches to work together in promoting ?justice, peace, reconciliation and development,? asserting that, ?Social work is the meaning of apostleship.?

tIn a brief response, Benedict expressed the hope that ?our churches may draw closer in the unity which is the Holy Spirit?s gift,? and pledged support for common efforts to foster ?the integral development of Africa?s

peoples.?

tYesterday afternoon, bishops representing Latin America, Oceania, Asia and North America addressed the synod, as well the lone American prelate in the gathering: Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, Georgia, who was the first African-American to be elected president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

?Our Catholic community has benefitted directly during the past generation from a growing number of clergy and religious from the great African continent,? Gregory said, ?who now serve Catholics throughout our nation and who serve them generously and zealously.?

?These new arrivals come, not like those of an earlier moment in time, wearing chains and as human chattel, but as skilled workers, professionally trained businessmen, and students eager to make a new life in a land that they view as promising,? he said.

Gregory suggested that those Africans may be able to provide a spiritual shot in the arm to the church in the States.

?Many of these new peoples bring with them a profound and dynamic Catholic faith with its rich spiritual heritage,? he said. ?These wonderful people challenge us to rediscover our own spiritual traditions that so often are set aside because of the influence of our secular pursuits.?

In general, the bishops from the other regions stressed the things they have in common with African Catholics, including a common concern with social ills such as HIV/AIDS, global warming and climate change, problems of corruption and good governance, populist and nationalist political movements, poverty, and social violence and armed conflict.

The early tone of the Synod for Africa would appear to have a decidedly *ad extra* emphasis, focused on broad social and political challenges rather than insider Catholic baseball.

Archbishop Orlando Quevedo of Cotabato in the Philippines, speaking on behalf of the bishops of Asia, also used the conclusion of his speech yesterday afternoon to issue the pope an invitation: ?May we invite you, beloved Holy Father, to visit our region in the near future.?

tAfter overseas trips to Brazil, Australia, the United States, Cameroon and Angola, and the Holy Land, Asia remains the lone continent which has yet to host a visit from Pope Benedict XVI.

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