

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 10, 2009 at 11:13am

In search of one good idea at the Synod of Bishops

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NCR Today

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Rome

Anyone who has ever endured the first week of a Vatican-sponsored Synod of Bishops, reading mountains of paperwork and listening to a seemingly endless cycle of speeches, will appreciate this metaphor: Whatever else it may be, a Synod of Bishops is like a particle accelerator for words.

A synod concentrates tremendous energy in a confined space, producing a collision that releases a vast amount of verbiage. Consider that the average speech given in the synod hall is perhaps 1,000 words long; with roughly 200 speeches during the first week and a half, that's 200,000 words in speech-making alone, to say nothing of the two lengthy preparatory documents, the two weighty speeches given by the *relator*, and so on. Conservatively, one could estimate that each synod generates at least a million words.

Truth to be told, at least some of that language — though typically full of passion and good will — is forgotten as soon as it's pronounced.

People who have been around the block once or twice with a Synod of Bishops will tell you that if all the talk produces even one concrete action item — just one impulse, new approach, or plan that someone can actually implement in the here-and-now — it's a win for the home team. For example, the Synod of Bishops on the Family in 1980 led to the creation of the Pontifical Council for the Family in 1981; the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist accelerated the trend toward recovery of Eucharistic adoration; and the Synod on the Bible in 2008 prompted wider use of *lectio divina*, or prayerful reading of Scripture, in dioceses and parishes.

At the end of the Synod for Africa's first week, veteran synod-watchers thus find themselves sifting

through the torrent of verbiage, searching for that one concrete idea which could emerge as this synod's most tangible, immediate result.

The Synod for Africa is meeting Oct. 4-25 in Rome. So far, the following have been the most concrete, readily achievable ideas to surface in the discussion. Whatever their other merits, they at least point to a desire to ensure that at some point, the rhetorical rubber hits the road.

1. A Nuncio to the African Union

Formed in 2002 as the successor to the Organization of African Unity, the AU is formed of 52 African states and, in fits and starts, is emerging as the most important political and diplomatic platform for addressing issues on a continental level. Among other things, the AU has played a role in attempting to resolve conflicts in Darfur, Comoros, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, the Ivory Coast and other countries.

The AU headquarters are located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and on Tuesday afternoon, the archbishop of Addis Ababa and the president of the Ethiopian bishops' conference laid perhaps the single most concrete idea of the synod to date on the table: "It is my hope that the Holy See appoints a permanent representative to the AU" [who] preferably would have diplomatic credentials comparable to the ones of an Apostolic Nuncio," said Archbishop Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel.

Souraphiel likewise called upon the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) to appoint an observer to the African Union, and vowed that the local church in Addis Ababa would do what it takes to welcome such representatives and to facilitate their work.

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While synods are typically all over the map in their early stages, Souraphiel's proposal is one of the few ideas that has drawn an unambiguous second from another synod father.

On Thursday, Auxiliary Bishop Barry Wood of Durban, South Africa, speaking on behalf of the bishops of Southern Africa (a group that includes South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland) said that body wanted "to endorse Archbishop Berhaneyesus Souraphiel's suggestion that a full time Catholic permanent representative be appointed to the African Union, with more than simply observer status."

Informally, several other synod participants have said they find the idea of a nuncio to the AU attractive, for at least two reasons: First, it would signal the Vatican's interest in Africa; two, the AU would likely take such a papal delegate seriously, giving that person the opportunity to wield significant clout in shaping African policies.

One other consideration also commends the idea: Unlike ending war or protecting Africa from the consequences of global climate change, appointing a nuncio to the AU is something the pope can do with the stroke of a pen.

2. A North/South Summit in 2010

Ironically, one leading candidate for the best immediate idea of the Synod for Africa has come from a non-African: Archbishop Orlando Quevedo of Cotabato in the Philippines, who's attending the synod as a representative of the Federation of Asian Episcopal Conferences (FABC).

On Thursday afternoon, Quevedo observed that many of the problems afflicting Africa have a global dimension, ticking off the arms trade, the trafficking of women and children, the destruction of the environment, corruption, the support of dictatorial regimes, population control, migration, poverty and underdevelopment, economic globalization, global warming and climate change.

This is especially so, Quevedo said, since decisions impacting the peoples of the South are made by powers in the North.

In consequence, Quevedo made the following suggestion: I respectfully propose that some Vatican agency convoke a gathering of some bishops from North and South in 2010, he said. They would plan and put flesh into a project of communion and solidarity among bishops, South-South and North-South, in order to respond from the viewpoint of religious faith and morality to urgent issues of reconciliation, justice and peace.

As with a nuncio to the AU, informally Quevedo's idea seemed to generate interest among synod participants. As some noted, the proposal could be seen as redundant, since the Synod of Bishops itself is, in a sense, a North/South event, representing the entire universal church. Nonetheless, the overwhelming preponderance of bishops at the Synod for Africa are Africans, with only a smattering from other continents. The same has been true for previous regional synods concerned with other parts of the global South.

A true North/South summit, on the other hand, could be a way to harness more focused gestures of solidarity within the church, and to offer a model of North/South cooperation to the wider world.

3. Three Ideas for Empowering Women

Friday turned into a day for women at the African Synod, with three memorable speeches by female participants. Perhaps the most lively came from Our Lady of the Apostles Sr. Felicia Harry of Ghana, who argued for greater collaboration with women inside the church, and closed with a provocative exhortation: Harry invited the bishops, before they went to bed that night, to spend just two minutes pondering what the church would be like without its women.

Two bishops, Archbishop Telesphore Mpundu of Lusaka, Zambia, and Bishop Philip Sulumeti of Kakamega, Kenya, made reference to women's issues on Saturday morning, prompting Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier of South Africa, who was presiding over the morning session, to joke that at least somebody had been paying attention to Harry's request.

Sulumeti offered a memorable line in support of greater attention to women: "Remember that if you educate a man, you educate an individual," he said, "but if you educate a woman, you educate a family, and if you educate women, you educate a nation."

Mpundu was equally forceful.

"Without true justice between men and women, development remains only a pipedream, simply a dangerous mirage," he said.

Three concrete ideas have been floated so far by way of addressing the challenges facing Africa's Catholic women.

One came from Harry, who said: As well as teach catechism to children, decorate parish churches,

clean, mend and sew vestments, we the women religious in Africa would like to be part of various parish councils.?

"We do not want to take over the responsibility of the parish priest," Harry added, "we just want to be equal partners in the Lord's vineyard."

One impulse flowing from the synod, therefore, could be to augment the number of women, including women religious, serving on diocesan and parish-level pastoral and financial councils.

A related notion came from Mpundu, who recommended the creation of women's affairs offices in African dioceses.

"To promote respect for women and their integration into church structures of responsibility, decision making and planning," Mpundu said, "we call upon the Synod to recommend to all dioceses the establishment or consolidation of family apostolate and women affairs offices, making them operational and fully effective.

A third concrete idea came from Bishop Matthew Kwasi Gyamfi on Sunyani in Ghana, on the subject of the church's Code of Canon Law and the widespread African custom of polygamous marriage. Insistence that women who convert to Catholicism abandon their polygamous marriages, he said, often leads to untold economic hardships and social tension.?

In some cases, Gyamfi said, women are caught in a no-win situation: either they walk away from their husbands, risking the loss of housing and financial support for themselves and their children, or they remain in the marriage and are therefore denied the sacraments of the church ? not counting,? he pointedly added, ?the many denied fitting Christian burial for not being baptized.?

As a result, Gyamfi proposed that this ?painful and unpleasant situation? be resolved by ?giving some special privileges to women? presently locked into polygamous relationships, allowing them to receive ?the sacraments of initiation and others.?

Such an idea would probably require some form of special dispensation from the Code of Canon Law, and it might also be controversial in light of the strong current running through the Synod for Africa in defense of the traditional Christian understanding of the family. Nonetheless, it's one of the few eminently practical suggestions for signaling sensitivity to women to surface so far.

4. Peace Elders

Observers of the African Catholic scene generally say that one promising trend in various parts of the continent has been the emergence of strong ?Peace and Justice Commissions? in dioceses and at the national level. Indeed, many of the experts and advisors at the current Synod for Africa, both those inside the synod hall and those on the outside looking in, are drawn from those commissions.

Missionaries of Africa Fr. Seán O'Leary, who directs the Denis Hurley Peace Institute in South Africa, offered a concrete way on Friday morning to extend the work of those commissions, one rooted in the experience of post-apartheid South Africa.

Identify key people (bishops, clergy, religious and lay people) who would be trained to intervene in peace monitoring, peace negotiations and sustaining fragile peace structures,? O'Leary proposed.

At the outbreak of any one conflict or potential conflict, two or three of these trained people would be

invited to intervene in the country in question, primarily to support the local church on the ground," O'Leary said. "The idea would always be to support the local church."

"This would become our very own group of 'Peace Elders,'" he said, "and would be established as a direct consequence of this august assembly."

(O'Leary's idea amounts to a loose reference to a body known as the "Global Elders," chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, and co-founded by former South African President Nelson Mandela. It brings together a group of elder statesmen and human rights activists who make themselves available for conflict resolution.)

Though saying he didn't want to add to the workload of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, O'Leary suggested that it would be "the most competent authority in the church to organize such an initiative."

That idea could have some traction — especially if, as widely expected, Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana takes over the helm as President of the Council for Justice and Peace. Turkson is currently the *relator*, or general secretary, of the Synod for Africa.

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