

A roundup of this week's events in Rome

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 16, 2009



Marguerite Barankitse, a synod participant from Burundi, greets a bishop as they leave a session of the Synod of Bishops for Africa at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

A Synod of Bishops is styled as an event of the universal church, so even when it focuses on a specific region, as with the Oct. 4-25 Synod for Africa, it's still directed at the whole Catholic world. From an American point of view, therefore, there's nothing wrong with looking at the synod, now two-thirds complete, and asking: What does it mean for us?

It's actually a terrific question, for two reasons.

First, the swelling number of recent African immigrants in the United States, estimated at anywhere from one to three million and climbing, represents an important new piece of the American Catholic pie. That's especially the case given the growing number of parishes led by African priests, which means that a broadly African sensibility will have a disproportionate impact on setting the American pastoral tone.

(Tongue in cheek, one might say that zealous young priests are the number one export commodity of African Catholicism. On Tuesday, Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, the lone U.S. bishop in the African synod, told *NCR* that "the jury is still out" on the experience of African priests in American parishes, saying that different approaches to the role of women, or to the social expectations of a parish priest, can sometimes create a nettlesome cultural gap.)

Second, Africa is destined to have an ever-greater influence on global church. It's a continent where the Catholic population exploded from 1.9 million in 1900 to some 165 million today. There's a youthful, optimistic spirit about the faith in Africa, coupled with a rising generation of clergy, religious and lay activists determined to see Africa as a protagonist, not just a subject, of church history.

All that means American Catholics would be well advised to look to the current Synod for Africa for clues about their own future. At that big-picture level, at least three points seem to emerge.

1. Beyond insider baseball

If the African bishops seem to be asking for one thing from their counterparts in Europe and the United States, it's not so much more money -- though, to be sure, many of them have great needs, and would be delighted to get extra financial support -- but more solidarity. They're asking Catholics in the West to ponder how choices made in policy centers such as Brussels or Washington end up affecting Africa, and then to deploy the resources of the church to try to shape those policy decisions in a more just, humane way.

Here's how Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, put it in an interview with *NCR* on Wednesday.

"We're not just interested in 'solidarity' in the sense of money and support, but also, for instance, lobbying," he said. "We might ask the American bishops to approach an American mining firm that's causing mayhem in Ghana. We might ask the Australian bishops to talk to an Australian firm that's causing an ecological disaster in Ghana."

"I believe that when we leave here, this ecclesial solidarity will be moved onto a more activist plane, a lobbying kind of plane," Palmer-Buckle said.



On Tuesday, the synod's general secretary, Cardinal Peter Turkson (also of

Ghana, and a classmate of Palmer-Buckle), ticked off a whole catalogue of global justice issues that have surfaced in the synod, including:

- Migration, both on the African continent itself and the growing number of African migrants in Europe and the United States.
- Good governance, corruption and bribery -- including how corrupt regimes are sometimes sustained in power by Western support.
- Unjust trade conditions established by international bodies such as the World Trade Organization.
- The environment, including the potential implications of climate change for Africa's stability.
- Threats to women, including genital mutilation, pornography, prostitution, violence and "many kinds of humiliation in society."
- HIV/AIDs and other diseases -- ensuring, Turkson pointedly added, that the maladies of Africa "receive the same attention as those of Europe."
- The arms trade, including a call for closing the factories of arms manufacturers.
- The "lust of some multinational corporations" in pillaging the natural resources of some African nations, and a call for creating "an international judicial system" capable of holding those multi-nationals accountable.

To the extent that the African bishops help set the agenda for the global church -- and to the extent that the present synod produces a deeper spirit of kinship between the church in Africa and in the United States -- the net effect should be to drive American Catholicism into more energetic engagement with those social and political concerns. In other words, one "African effect" in the 21st century could be to push American Catholicism into a more *ad extra* posture, focused on the broader world rather than insider church baseball.

2. Bolstering the right in the culture wars

If the first point seems to cut in what Americans might consider a "liberal" direction, the approach of the African bishops to issues of gender, the family, and sexual morality moves decisively in the opposite direction. On that cluster of concerns, forming what Americans know as the "culture wars," the growing influence of Africa seems likely to steer Catholicism toward a more conservative posture.

Addressing the synod last week, Archbishop Joseph Tlhagale of Johannesburg, president of the South African bishops' conference, asserted that Africa is "under heavy strain from liberalism, secularism and from lobbyists who squat at the United Nations." He called it "a second wave of colonization, both subtle and ruthless at the same time." Palmer-Buckle was equally emphatic in his *NCR* interview, asserting that there's a "deliberate campaign" to push Africa towards acceptance of practices such as abortion and homosexuality, stemming from what he called "a particular lobby that sees African values as a danger to the 'new global ethic' propounded by the U.N., by the World Bank, by the IMF, and even by the European Union."

"What's happening is against our culture, and nobody will convince me that there isn't a deliberate agenda," Palmer-Buckle said.

At this stage, it seems clear that among its conclusions, the synod will issue a defense of traditional family values, and a stinging critique of the influence of Western NGOs and other bodies advocating an ethos of European-style tolerance.

Having said that, it also seems clear that the "culture wars" are not what most African bishops are thinking about when they get out of bed in the morning. A striking number of African prelates have praised U.S. President Barack Obama inside and outside the synod hall, and when pressed to respond to Obama's pro-choice stance on the "life issues," they generally say that while those differences are important, they're pieces of a larger picture in which there's also considerable common ground.

In general, the "Africa effect" on issues of family and sexual morality thus will likely be to strengthen the traditionalist position, but also to challenge a tendency to focus nearly exclusively on the life issues at the expense of other matters of social concern.

3. A Self-Critical Spirit

This is the second Synod for Africa, following the first such assembly in 1994. Anyone trying to compare the two will certainly note one contrast: there's a far more tangible spirit of introspection, and of ecclesiastical self-criticism, this time around.

When African Catholic leaders travel abroad, they're often hesitant to air their dirty laundry for fear of feeding what are already negative stereotypes in the West, focusing on Africa's familiar litany of woe -- poverty, war, disease, corruption, and so on. At this synod, however, that normal filter seems to have been ripped away, as bishops and other participants have spoken in strikingly open terms about the need for internal church reform.

Again, Turkson provided a recap in his speech on Tuesday:

- "Insufficient appreciation for the role of women and youth."
- "The difficulty that some pastoral agents have in being faithful to their vows, vocations and states of life."
- Relationships between pastors and co-workers, and how church employees are treated -- including the issue of a just wage. Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze provided the most memorable sound-bite,

lamenting that too often church employees are forced to get by "only with holy water at the end of the month."

- The need for "in-depth evangelization," designed in part to help Catholics withstand the growing appeal of traditional religious practices such as witchcraft as well as new religious movements such as Pentecostalism.
- Overcoming ethnic divisions inside the church: "It is crucial to convince the Christian faithful that the fraternal bonds established by Christ through the waters of baptism and through his blood are stronger than blood ties," Turkson said.

Women's issues have been especially prominent, prompting Turkson to declare that the synod fathers "have heard the cry of women." At this stage, it seems likely that among the final propositions of the synod will be a strong call for empowering African women both in society and in the church -- including, perhaps, recommendations for hiring more talented women to play leadership roles in the church and setting up women's affairs offices in African dioceses.

What seems to lie beneath this self-critical spirit is a sobering appraisal of the fifteen years between the first African Synod and the current meeting. Despite the much-heralded declaration from the first synod of the African church as the "Family of God," it has become painfully clear, many synod participants have said, that Catholics have not had the desired transformative impact on African societies.

"Every country has said that wherever there was corruption, our Catholics were among the corrupt," Palmer-Buckle said. "Wherever there was civil war, our Catholics were among those who were instigating the violence."

Mincing no words, he said: "The church feels we have failed."

"We're not going to go away from here blaming others," Palmer-Buckle said. "We know we've got homework to do."

A final "African effect," then, could be to prompt a broader examination of conscience throughout the church.

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Coming into any Synod of Bishops, Vatican-watchers are always on high alert for the possible emergence of a new *papabile*, meaning a candidate to be pope. Among their other functions, synods are a forum for rising stars to leave a positive impression on their peers.

This time around, one obvious candidate as the next great African *papabile* seems Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana. He's the *relator*, or general secretary, of the synod, a role that Cardinals Karol Wojtyla of Cracow and Joseph Ratzinger of Munich both played before becoming Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. At 61, Turkson is young (at least by ecclesiastical standards), dynamic, multi-lingual, and charismatic.

As the event nears its end, the obvious question is: How's he doing?

Internally, reviews for Turkson have been mostly positive. His two major speeches, one before and one after the opening round of discussion, drew good reviews for being true to the broad range of issues and opinions expressed, rather than trying to impose Turkson's own "line." Participants have described him as approachable, good-humored, and hard-working, obviously an impressive mix of qualities.

Externally, however, the bag is more mixed. On the opening day of the synod, Turkson took part in a press conference in which two absolutely inevitable and predictable questions arose: condoms and the prospects for a "black pope."

Speaking in English, Turkson offered a convoluted reply on condoms that was initially interpreted by some Italian news outlets as a call for relaxing the church's ban. The Vatican eventually issued a transcript of what he had actually said, and although it was sufficiently disjointed as to make any definitive conclusion impossible, it clearly didn't support the spin the news agencies had given it.

On the idea of a "black pope," Turkson gave precisely the answer you would have expected. It's God's church, he said, so if God in his providence were to lead the church to elect a black pope, why not? That, too, was "sexed up" in some Italian coverage, making it seem as if Turkson were almost demanding that the next pope come from Africa. (In passing, Turkson mentioned that Kofi Annan had served as Secretary General of the United Nations, and because Annan is from Ghana, some reporters inferred that Turkson was suggesting that the next pope could be from Ghana too ? i.e., him.)

The experience left Turkson with something of a bitter aftertaste. I ran into him outside the synod hall on Wednesday, and he grouched that the Italian papers were making it sound as if "I'm going to run the pope out of town on a rail." In a moment of frustration, he said that if that's how the media wants to play it, maybe he just won't talk to them anymore.

One understands the sentiment, but handling the media is part of the job description of any church leader. Given what some observers regard as the mixed track record of Benedict XVI on that score, watching another cardinal struggle to get his message across could induce skepticism about Turkson as a potential successor. Of course, it could also have precisely the opposite effect, generating sympathy for Turkson -- in particular, perhaps, among cardinals from other parts of the world, some of whom have their own tales of woe about run-ins with the press.

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The Obama administration and the Vatican presented what amounts to their first joint project this week, an Oct. 14-15 conference on preventing transmission of HIV/AIDS to children. The event was organized by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, and co-sponsors included Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican's umbrella group for Catholic charities worldwide, and the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers.

The conference, held at the Opus Dei-sponsored Santa Croce University, was also the public debut of new U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Miguel Diaz, who presented his credentials to Pope Benedict on Oct. 2.

The conference was a bold choice, since it easily could have gone off the rails. Had it become bogged down over condoms, it would have been a clear reminder of Obama's nagging "Catholic problem," meaning the obvious clash between the White House and the church over the life issues. The potential payoff, however, was that the conference could also serve as a model of how the Obama administration and the church can work together, even in areas where they may have some disagreements.



In the end, participants reported that they managed to get through the event without

any real fireworks, focusing instead on the stated concern with children. As Lesley-Anne Knight, the secretary general of Caritas, told the meeting, most HIV-positive children around the world aren't even diagnosed before the disease takes hold, and the vast majority won't survive their second birthday. Knight called it "a scandal in our world" that some 800 children die every day from AIDS-related illnesses.

The underlying message seemed to be that whatever their differences, secular governments and the Catholic church share a common interest in trying to save as many children as possible from a cruel and largely unnecessary death -- for example, by promoting better and cheaper methods of pre-natal screening and health care, and investing in early childhood health and nutrition.

The case for such a spirit of common cause was put effectively by Diaz.

"The United States is the largest donor of global aid," he told the conference, "and the Catholic church is the world's largest aid delivery organization."

"Clearly," he said, "our partnership really matters."

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Two of the Vatican's brightest stars came out to shine this week, both taking part in press

conferences to highlight new projects. Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top officer for ecumenical relations, presented his new book *Harvesting the Fruits* on Thursday; the day before, Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, dropped by to tout a new exhibit in the Vatican Museums on the history of astronomy. The exhibit, which runs from Oct. 16 to Jan. 16, displays telescopes, astrolabes, celestial globes and manuscripts, such as Galileo Galilei's original handwritten notes detailing his observations of the moon.

Both Kasper and Ravasi are men of deep erudition and a broad humanistic spirit, and both play important roles in bridging historic divides: Kasper with the other Christian churches and with Judaism, Ravasi with the worlds of science and the arts.

The motive for Kasper's book, published in English by Continuum in London, is to rebut impressions of an "ecumenical winter," meaning a stall in ecumenical progress related to divisions between Catholicism and several other Christian denominations over homosexuality and the ordination of women, as well as a stronger emphasis on traditional Catholic identity under Pope Benedict XVI. Not so, Kasper insisted, saying we are "at the height of summer."

Although the Vatican conducts dialogues with all three main branches of Christianity -- the Orthodox churches, the churches of the Reformation, and the Pentecostal and Evangelical movements -- *Harvesting the Fruits* focuses on the Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans and Reformed churches.

"That choice," Kasper said on Thursday, in typically candid fashion, is "a clear response to opinions that are going around, sometimes even in the Roman Curia, which amount to an unjustified accusation that ecumenism with the Protestants hasn't accomplished anything and has left us empty-handed."

The book, which runs to just over 200 pages, examines four concepts through the lens of how they've been approached in ecumenical dialogues since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65):

- Jesus Christ and the Trinity
- Salvation, Justification, and Sanctification
- The Church
- The sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist

By far, the longest chapter is on the church, reflecting the reality that it usually remains the most controversial point in conversations with the Protestant world.

Given his aim to revive ecumenical optimism, it's perhaps not surprising that Kasper doesn't want to be drawn onto potentially divisive ground. For example, when Kasper was asked on Thursday about rumors that the Traditional Anglican Communion, a breakaway bloc of conservative Anglican churches, might soon be incorporated into the Catholic church, he seemed to want to play down the impact of such a move on Anglican/Catholic relations.

"We are not fishing in the Anglican lake," Kasper insisted. "Proselytism is not a policy of the Catholic church."

That said, Kasper added that "if in conscience some [Anglicans] want to become Catholics, we cannot shut the door." He also noted that negotiations with the Traditional Anglican Communion are not being handled by his office, but by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Two footnotes:

- Asked why Pope Benedict XVI has not entered a Protestant church on any of his foreign trips, Kasper said that it's not a question of policy. He then revealed something that up to now has not been officially confirmed: Sometime in the near future, Pope Benedict plans to visit the Lutheran church in Rome.
- Kasper said that his book was not written as a farewell, but that he'll turn 77 in March, which is already "past the normal age to retire." As it is, he said, he's "willing to work in and for the church as long as God gives me strength and health," but how much longer he'll be in office "isn't up to me."

For his part, Ravasi argued that the new astronomy exhibit in the Vatican Museums offers a chance to reflect on one of "the most relevant, and at times exasperating" themes in the life of the church, which is "the relationship between science and theology."

Ravasi argued that one of the "great conquests" in recent decades has been a clear distinction between science and theology -- overcoming the conflicts of the past by treating the two, in the language of late Stephen J. Gould, as "parallel tracks." Both science and theology, from this perspective, have "their own rules, methods and epistemologies," Ravasi said, and one doesn't invalidate the other.

Although that represents a step forward, Ravasi said, distinguishing science and theology isn't quite enough. Today, he said, what's needed is a "theory of dialogue." In the end, he said, neither science nor theology can afford to "walk alone, without hearing the voice of the other." He cited debates over the concepts of both time and space as areas where scientists and theologians can profitably learn something from one another.

Ravasi appealed for both sides in the tension between science and faith to move beyond ancient antagonisms.

"It's legitimate to put the mistakes of the past before the tribunal of history," he said, "but that court can't be in session forever. At some stage, you also have to look to the future."

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