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African bishop on Islam, oil , and why selling the Vatican is a stupid idea

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

Rome -- Earlier this week, I interviewed Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, the lone American member of the Oct. 4-25 Synod for Africa, and asked him how many of the African bishops he already knew. He ticked off several, beginning with Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria -- but at that point Gregory stopped himself, saying, "I guess that doesn't really count, because everybody knows Onaiyekan!?"

He made a bishop at the tender age of 38, and now in full stride at 65, Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan is Africa's superstar prelate, known around the world as the voice of his continent.

How ubiquitous is Onaiyekan? Consider that he's taking a break from the synod on Monday to fly to London, where that night he'll debate the planet's most famous atheist, Christopher Hitchens, on the topic of whether the Catholic church is a force for good in the world. The event is hosted by a renowned BBC anchor. Someone else might be cowed, but when my wife wished Onaiyekan good luck, he shot back: "Good luck to Hitchens!?"

Onaiyekan is the immediate past president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of African and Madagascar, the current president of the ecumenical Christian Alliance of Nigeria, the president of the West Africa conference of bishops, as well as the man responsible for drafting the concluding message for the present Synod for Africa.

Colleagues often say that Onaiyekan is the living embodiment of the Nigerian national character -- brash, bold, unafraid to speak his mind and tell it like it is. Over the years, he's earned a reputation for intelligence, candor, and good humor.

†This afternoon, Onaiyekan sat down with a group of English-speaking journalists to talk about the synod so far. Topics included:

- Why multinational oil companies such as BP and Shell feel free to do things in Africa they'd never get away with back home;
- How the Catholic/Islamic relationship can get rolling if we forget about theology and focus on concrete social issues;
- Why it's a stupid idea to think the pope could help the poor by selling off the Vatican;
- Why the synod has taken such a strikingly self-critical spirit;
- How the mindsets of journalists and the Catholic church often don't mix.

The following is a transcript of Onaiyekan's session with journalists, which took place in the Press Office of the Holy See.

Opening remarks

This is not a lecture, this is an interactive session. We have been working for almost two weeks now. We have reached the stage when the work is not as interesting as when we are sitting there listening to beautiful stories. Now it's time to really try and come out with something, to distill some clear ideas and messages and commitments. That's a bit more difficult, less enjoyable but no less important. That's where we are at present.

A lot of us [in the press] are not from Africa, and we've been going through the synod pulling out things that are of interest to us. For your people in the parishes, what do you think the main points, the main message, from this synod will be?

It depends on which of my people we're talking about. The message is going to try and reach out to different categories within the church. For example, if you talk about the Archbishop of Abuja, he might have breakfast with the head of state in the morning, and in the evening he's in one village talking to some poor women who needs him to convince her that it's worthwhile to let her daughter go to school. So, you move from a beautiful mansion to a hovel in the middle of nowhere, all within an hour's drive. That's one of the challenges we have when we preach at Mass, because sitting in front of you is the whole gamut of the community, and you have to preach to all these people. You have to find ways of being able to identify different categories, and deliver to them the kind of message we believe they need.

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So, to answer your question is not so simple. I'm not sure what I would tell them, except to say that they should all be very good Catholics, as much as they can, and they should let their Christian faith be reflected in all aspects of their lives, wherever God has put them. It's a message that most of them know very well already, starting from the most humble and poorest ? they have grasped this message very carefully. It's really more challenging for those who are high up in society. Those who have responsibility for the way our country goes have more difficulty in marrying their faith with their professional and public lives, and that is a major challenge.

I would also tell them that I had a good time here these three weeks, that meeting other bishops from Africa, hearing their stories, has confirmed me in my faith. On my occasions, it's helped me to get out of

my own preoccupations with my problems, which I thought were very big, and I find that other people have far more serious problems than we are dealing with. With that kind of attitude, I'll go back home very encouraged, and I will share that with my people. Things aren't perfect, but don't forget it could be worse. Of course, it could be better.

The post-discussion report mentioned that there's a problem with multi-national mining companies in Africa, and talked about the idea of an international tribunal to hold these companies accountable. What is it exactly that you would like to see?

Of course, we are bishops, so we are very optimistic and we say nice things. Obviously, we will target our message to the ideal situation. We believe that there are certain things which just should not be done. The law of profit should have limits in terms of how you exploit natural resources. This is not only in terms of the economic conditions under which that's done, how much you pay for the raw materials you're taking out in relation to how much it's actually worth ? that's an old story, and these are the old quarrels we've had ? but also in terms of the environment. How much is anybody allowed to devastate the environment, simply because they want to extract resources, such as minerals, oil, and so on?

I will add two other considerations.

The first has to do with simple justice. Some of these multi-nationals operate with double standards. I can't see BP, Shell, or Mobil doing what they're doing in the Niger Delta in the North Sea, or in Texas. They're the same people, which means that things they wouldn't tolerate at home they do quite freely in Africa. Maybe they think Africa is a no-man's land where anything can happen.

The second consideration, and it's an item that has very much occupied and preoccupied the synod fathers, is the responsibility of our own leaders. Mobil, Shell, Agip ? I have to make sure I mention different countries, so they won't accuse me [of bias] ? you can also add Elf. They all come, but they don't just move in and start doing these things. In all the cases, there is some amount of so-called agreement with the local rulers, who claim to have negotiated on behalf of the people. Now, the synod has come out very strongly that our leaders ought to protect our environment. They ought to have their eyes wide open. If one is to be generous in judgment, you'd say perhaps [these leaders] are ignorant in judgment, but we're not so sure they're that stupid. We have very intelligent people, both in and outside of government, who ought to know to insist on a basic minimum.

That brings us back to the whole idea of an international code of conduct. It would be useless if it's not going to be implemented, which has happened with many other codes that have been simply ignored. It seems that in the world of today, the more powerful you are, the more you can afford to ignore the rules which they quite happily impose on others. That's the world we live in.

We may add, to, that more and more now we are realizing that we are not only on one planet, but in one village where we live together as a human family. Destroying the environment in Nigeria affects the whole of our planet. Maybe the more that is recognized, the kind of international approach might become more feasible because it would be seen as enlightened self-interest to really put some rules into the way things are. Just like every city has rules as regards what to do with the trash they produce, for the sake of the immediate environment, if we begin to see the whole world as one environment we will be ready to put our heads together ? knowing that what happens in one place affects the other places.

I was in New York three weeks ago, with a team of lobbyists around the United Nations summit on climate change, and this matter came out very strongly. It became very clear that if we're talking about the industrial growth of the rich countries, that is not only linked with the exploitation of raw materials from poor nations, but also with lots of consequences for the environment. How you produce, what you

do to your factories here, is already having negative effects for places far, far away, such as islands. Some Pacific islands are disappearing, which have been there for centuries. At first, we did not see it in Africa. We used to think that floods and droughts are God's work done to us, so we would go pray and sacrifice. Now we know that it's not God's cause, that people are responsible. Unfortunately, human beings are short-sighted, so they don't look far enough. Maybe that's where a group like ours, the bishops, together and don't forget, we're not just Africans here. We have bishops from the U.S., from Europe, from Asia and we have a common mind on this matter. [We should] treat our planet well, and do all we can to make sure that every single individual in this family can live decently, so that all of us can live in peace.

Prior to the synod, you said you were disappointed with the preparatory document's treatment of Islam, and you hoped more would come up in the discussion. You gave your own intervention [speech] on Islam. Will the synod offer any new ideas about relations with Islam?

Islam has come up. You rightly refer to my own intervention, which I must say surprised some of my older colleagues. I spoke about Islam also in 1994, and my language was, "Here where are with a group of people confronting us, threatening our very existence, and what do we do? We can't just keep quiet, we must let them know that this can't continue, not just in our country but in others." At that time, we insisted that we really need to talk with them, so the emphasis was on dialogue. This time, the very title of my intervention was, "From dialogue to collaboration." Having talked to each other for so long, we know each other fairly well, it's about time we should be able to gather ourselves together.

The theme of the synod, I think, has helped us to move a bit further in the whole discussion of inter-religious dialogue. The problem with inter-religious dialogue is that it leaves the religions, especially Christianity and Islam, simply looking at each other, with the danger that you're only looking at where you differ and where you're quarreling. You're only looking at the relative strengths of one against the other, and our competition for the souls and the hearts of our people. That's generally not a very nice kind of operation. But when we start talking of conflicts, wars, poverty, reconciliation, disease, bad governance, corruption, we suddenly discover that these are things which are hitting everybody. Whether you're a Christian or a Muslim in Nigeria, you find exactly the same thing. Without thinking of religion, we want to deal with it. Those who are on the receiving end, and they're already doing it, have no difficulty putting their heads together to see what can be done. The way we go further is that, in all this, religion ought to be one of the positive instruments for overcoming these challenges. We feel we've reached a stage where we can actually move in this direction. It's like this: by exercising, you begin to know how to get things done. If you don't start working together, you won't be able realize that you actually can work together.

If it remains on the level of dialogue, often it will seem useless. I don't see what dialogue I can have with a Muslim on the person of Jesus. He says Jesus is a prophet, I say he's God. There's no meeting point, and it will remain like that. If I accept that he's just a prophet, only a little bit less than Muhammad, then I have become a Muslim. If he agrees that Jesus is God, even if he says that Muhammad is the greatest prophet, then he becomes a Christian. In those areas, there's really not much room for discussion.

To my surprise, and it's not only me from Nigeria, but the bishops from the countries that are heavily Muslim, the emphasis all the time was on working together. I think that's because of the theme of the synod, which forces us to focus our attention on reconciliation, justice, and peace. Many of us have also spoken from the point of view of experience, personal experience. Some of the African countries have given us examples of where the government itself invites, indeed pleads, with the religious leaders to come together to help them deal with certain situations.

We've noticed that generally, these kinds of operations are far more effective when they're done on an

inter-faith basis. The Catholic Church may be well-organized, perhaps, have many brilliant people, and all that, but when it comes to dealing with national issues, you may not be able to do it alone. If you reach out and join hands with other religious leaders, even if they are not as brilliant as you are, they do have their own following who respect them and who follow them. When the followers see their leaders working together, holding hands, talking to the press together and having photographs of themselves spread all over the television and the papers, it encourages them to continue what they actually have been doing all along.

Nigeria is to be taken as a good example. Religious difficulties have never really been among the people on the ground. They've always lived together in peace.

Can you give us a few examples?

Before the 2007 elections, the Nigerian Interreligious Council tabled the issue of elections as a major cause of concern to discuss at our meeting, and we did. At the end it was agreed that the Sultan, who leads all the Muslims, and myself as the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, would organize a press conference and appeal to all the politicians, "Please, allow our people to vote peacefully. All the political organization should eschew all violence, both physical and verbal." We also pleaded that the government should make sure that, this time around, the votes cast were counted, properly, so we would have a good democracy. We had that press conference, which was beautiful. Many people, most people, including the politicians, congratulated us. However, as you know, they went ahead and did whatever they wanted. We are like the sentries in Ezekiel. You warn the bad person to behave well. If you don't warn him, you will pay for it. He will still pay for his own actions too. If you warn him and he changes, he will be saved and you will be saved for doing your work. If you warn him and he does not change, you have done your duty. He still has to answer to God for himself. That's one example.

Another example is the whole question of HIV/AIDS. We realize the importance of the religious messages in the struggle to combat discrimination and stigmatization. When AIDS first came up, it was very difficult for religious people to handle. In fact, when I started talking about HIV/AIDS in the cathedral, a lot of people were a little bit worried. They felt that this kind of thing should not be mentioned by the archbishop, not to talk of it in the cathedral. I heard some mischievous people were saying, "Maybe the Archbishop is HIV-positive, and that's why he's always talking about these things." It was thought that HIV/AIDS only touches bad people. To make matters worse, there were some pastors and imams who carried the message that HIV/AIDS is punishment from God on bad people. So, we felt a greater responsibility to address this kind of thing.

We actually worked together. We had seminars, where Muslim and Christian religious came together, scholars, to pick texts and verses from the Qur'an and from the Holy Scriptures to sustain our work of combating discrimination and stigmatization, and also calling for care. Both the Qur'an and the Bible are full of texts you can use. Once you admit that HIV/AIDS is a disease, a calamity, and those who are under it deserve your care and your attention, it became easier. It also became easier for the government to bring in whatever little services they want to render.

That's quite apart from the fact that the religious organizations had structures on the ground to deliver [care]. The Catholic Church obviously would tell them, "We're not in the business of distributing condoms, but we're in the business of doing a lot of [other] things which are very important." Our government understands that, and we work together. Fortunately, in this matter, we and the Muslims are more or less in agreement.

A third example, which is the most recent, is Malaria. Maybe because of the population of Nigeria, which is 150 million, the number of people who are suffering from malaria and even dying of malaria every day

is very high in Nigeria. We are told that after Congo, we are perhaps the next highest number. The United Nations have decided to zero in on Nigeria with considerable resources to tackle malaria. By the way, malaria is killing more people in Nigeria than HIV/AIDS. It suddenly dawned on them that people are dying of other things. The UN Secretary General has a whole program on malaria, with a UN special envoy. They came to Nigeria, and our government had agreed to accept this assistance of the United Nations and from international organizations to really carry out a major program on malaria in Nigeria. At that point, however, someone in Washington insisted that they must involve the religious communities. So, we were informed. We didn't know what was going on, and we jumped at it. We formed a group called Nigerian Interfaith Action Association (NIFA). This is properly established and registered as a non-profit organization, so that funds can be put into it with proper accountability. It's more or less like a commission within the Nigerian Interreligious Council. This is the first time we're doing that kind of job. The sultan and I are the joint chairmen of the Board of Trustees. We've brought in professionals – doctors, pediatricians, nurses, public health experts – from the two religions, They're working together as professionals. The churches and the mosques have made themselves available to be part of the government program.

Malaria is another disease where the problem isn't only medical. Take the example of advising people to sleep under the nets. A doctor cannot do much on that. But a parish priest in a village, talking to 2,000 people, can tell them: 'I have nets in the parish house for each and every one of you. If you come tomorrow morning, everybody will collect his own. You must use it so as to protect yourself against mosquitoes.' First, they will reach more people. Second, in a country where government has consistently told lies to the people, the people tend not to even listen to what the government says. If people who are credible say it, it goes a long way. We also know that malaria is spread around because of dirt around, simple hygiene, and the church can do a lot along those lines. But we told the government that these things cost money. If they want us to be involved, then some of the funds meant for the malaria program should also be made available to those who are joining this kind of effort.

A final example: Many of you are aware that two months ago, there was a major outbreak of violence in Maiduguri [in northern Nigeria]. It was a very stupid outbreak. I contacted the sultan at that time, because we [Nigeria] were always the first item on the news, in the most disturbing and shameful way, embarrassing. The sultan and I agreed that we would put out a joint statement, condemning what has happened and quite clearly saying that this cannot be justified by any religion. In this case, it was clear that people were shouting about Islam. I and the sultan jointly signed the statement, saying that this is not Islam. It was the first time I know, at that level, there was a common statement on a religious issue. Up to now, whenever these things happened, the best our decent Muslim leaders would do is simply keep quiet. They wouldn't talk. Sometimes, they would even try to find a way of justifying what has happened. But now we have moved, we are beginning to look things straight in the face. If it is wrong, we're prepared to say it together.

I believe this is because we started to get to know one another. I thank God that we have reached this stage. I didn't know we would reach it fifteen years ago when we came here [for the first African synod]. My own reading of the situation is that once one opens up to others, we begin to recognize one another on the level of our humanity. It's wonderful – a wonderful discovery.

There was hardly anything said in the synod about ecumenism, you in sub-Saharan Africa there's a strong presence of all the mainline churches, to say nothing of the Pentecostals. Can you comment on that?

The first comment is that there was some interventions that took the angle of the need to work on these matters in collaboration with 'others,' meaning men and women of good will, and also mentioning an

inter-religious approach and then an ecumenical approach. By the way, once or twice there were interventions that spoke of ecumenism more in a negative way, especially talking about the Pentecostals, who in certain places are actually very anti-Catholic in their approach and therefore are quite a problem. Even if you wanted to work ecumenically, they're not prepared to work with you.

You are right to say that ecumenism has not loomed large in our discussion. Of course, the very presence of the fraternal delegates kept reminding us of it. One of them, the Lutheran from Tanzania, called on the synod fathers not to forget that it's important to open up and work with other Christians.

The synod fathers were particularly concerned about what can we do [about the synod's themes], so the emphasis was on 'the church.' When we say 'the church' in this context, you know what we mean. In many interventions, the question was how the church as it is can position itself better. Therefore, there was a lot of self-examination, admission of inadequacies in many ways. Many of the interventions [said] that within the church itself, we must sort our own problems of reconciliation, justice and peace. It's this emphasis, and I believe it's not a bad one, that can make it appear we're only thinking about ourselves.

My hope is that if we indeed succeed in reorganizing ourselves better, it will naturally mean that we must also look around us and work with other people. I know that in many countries, there is that kind of rapport already among Christians. In Nigeria, we have the Christian Association of Nigeria. Indeed, we realize that it is issues like this that we all have to work on together. Beyond the national level, we do have some kind of relation at the continental level between SECAM and AACC, the 'All Africa Council of Churches.' At the time it was set up, it was more or less the African chapter of the World Council of Churches. Since the Catholic church is not part of the WCC, SECAM never became part of AACC. As president of SECAM, I did reach out to the AACC so we can find a forum to work together. I do not think we have made much progress in that regard.

Just by the way, one of the issues that arose in the synod is a realization that no matter how beautifully you propound your messages in your sermons and homilies, at the end of the day they are the politicians, the people with power, who must do things to bring about peace, justice and reconciliation. There was emphasis that somehow, in each country, you have to devise ways and means of dialogue and working with those who control your governments - starting with those of them who are supposed to be Catholics and whom you should expect to listen to your guidance, before you talk to others. In that context, we also spoke about African generally, and our continental governmental organizations, especially the African Union. Very often when it comes to a major political crisis, the AU steps in. We said that the Catholic church, SECAM, has already started to have a kind of status within AU, so that we have a forum to be able to intervene, and also to make ourselves available if they needed us. I reminded the synod that from the very beginning of the AU, the AACC has always enjoyed observer status. They didn't do much with it, though. I'm not even sure they attended the meetings of the AU, and I've never seen any initiative taken by the AACC in the context of African Union peace initiatives or whatever. We are now thinking we might consider finding some kind of joint working together, possibly within the already existing framework of the AACC position within the AU. Even if we're going to have our own SEAC representation, we should certainly work together.

I know that in the African Council of Religious Leaders, which I co-chair, we're also talking in the same line that we want to be in the AU. When people are discussing, and especially the heads of states, we should have the opportunity to call all of them to one small little meeting, or invite them to come and pray. In a way, when you call people to come and pray, you have a special facility to talk to them. We are already thinking along these lines.

Economic justice is a big theme in this synod, and you come from the world's poorest continent. Recently an American comedian did a bit on the Vatican, asking if the pope really cares about the poor, why doesn't he sell the Vatican and move into a more humble dwelling? Do you ever hear

that, and how would you respond?

First, it would depend who is telling me that. If that person is from Europe or America, I can suggest a few other things that they could sell to help the poor. I would tell them to start there first, before coming to the Vatican. But if any person from our own poor countries were to say such a thing, and I hardly see that happening ? the few poor people who come here have never said, ?Oh, why don't they sell this and give us money for food?? They always say, ?What a beautiful place.? They admire it. Maybe it's because man does not live by bread alone. It helps them to see how great our God is, and they're not expecting the Vatican to sell it off. Anyway, to whom? Who would buy it, and what would it cost? The joke [from the comedian] isn't only offensive and in bad taste, it's stupid.

What they should be asking is, what is the Vatican doing about poverty in the world? That's the question to be asked. If you've ever come up to see the pope's apartment, it is very straight-forward and simple. This isn't just his house, it's not just his mansion. As you know, the whole building has all the offices, the Secretariat of State, the Vatican Museums which occupies a whole lot of space, all that. It's like your White House isn't just the bedroom of Obama. Maybe if there were no Vatican, the pope would still need to build a house for himself and his offices. It would not be built like this, because I don't know that modern architects have the same kind of spirit as those who designed this, but that's another question.

The answer I would give is that poverty in the world has to be dealt with by justice. All these big structures, all those unjust economic structures in the world, those are the things to move so that the poor can survive. I think we know that sadness and the tragedy of it, and we know what to do. It can be done, and it can be done without reducing everybody to the same lowest common denominator of misery. What we don't have is the political, and I would say spiritual, will to do it. Will it come? I don't know.

Many issues have been identified in the synod so far. What happens to those issues that don't make it into the final documents?

The synod is first and foremost a meeting of the bishops to exchange ideas and to share concerns, so my conviction is that the record of the synod is in the synod fathers themselves as they go back home and share it with their brothers. What comes out in the papers ? the message, even the post-synodal exhortation ? these are just small bits of summary, a historical note to tell us that there was an African Synod II and these are some of the things they discussed. Therefore, the question of what happens to the other things doesn't really arise. Most of us were taking notes, some of us furiously, throughout. A lot of bishops must have made up their minds about what has struck them and what they intend to take back home. In terms of the report of the relator, he's looking for areas where the synod has generated a consensus. Some of the most brilliant ideas may not even get a consensus, so it will remain a brilliant idea that was floated around and it hit some people and they will take it back with them, but it will not feature in the propositions. I don't think we need to worry too much about that. It's well known that when you have a meeting, not just the church but the UN, etc., there's the discussion that goes on and what people take back home, and there's the report that is produced. Sometimes the report doesn't always reflect the reality of the discussion. It's like Jesus' gospel: we got four versions of what he said and did in three years. John even said that there are many, many other things which he said and did that weren't written down.

I also think you can't talk about a synod in the church without bringing in the spiritual and theological dimension. The pope warned us on the very first Sunday, at the Angelus, that this is not a study session, nor indeed a session where we sit down to prepare a plan of action. Instead, this is God's own doing, and we are there to listen to the Spirit talking to the church. If that is so, then the primacy for the actual drafting of the message of the synod must be that of the Holy Spirit, who will guide and direct people in

different ways.

Consider the first African Synod, which took place fifteen years ago. *Ecclesia in Africa* [the post-synodal exhortation issued by Pope John Paul II] came out much later, but before that people were already doing things. They are still doing many things as a result of what happened. Different people did different things. Some people found certain aspects particularly relevant to their situations and focused very much on them, while others focused on other things. For me, that's the beauty of the synod.

I'm the president of the commission for the message. We tried our best to project a message that will more or less give an idea of the spirit that moved within the synod. There was no intention at all of trying to give a comprehensive summary of what happened, nor were we preparing the scheme for the post-synodal exhortation. That will be a serious job for fifteen members of the council that work for the next two years before the draft is sufficiently in a position for the Holy Father to sign. Don't forget, the synod is an ongoing process. Even before we met here, we had studied the synod themes. Many countries have already started taking action [on the basis of the preparatory documents], and at the end they will continue.

The church does not operate like journalists, who are always waiting for the latest news, and they want it in sound-bites! We wait for things to sink in and to mature, to grow.

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