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Africa sees 'Occupy Wall Street' as positive sign, leading prelate says

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Cotonou, Benin

Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, has long been one of Africa's most visible, and most influential, Catholic prelates. He's a former president of SECAM, the umbrella group for bishops' conferences on the continent, as well as a former president of the Nigerian bishops. He's also a member of the Vatican council of the Synod for Africa, which means he had a hand in drafting the post-synodal document, *Africae Munus*, or 'Africa's Commitment,' which Benedict XVI presented today in Benin.

Onaiyekan, 67, is on hand in Benin, part of a cross-section of African bishops taking part in the papal trip. He sat down this afternoon for an interview with NCR, following a lunch in his Cotonou hotel which amounted to an informal reunion of bishops from up and down the continent.

The conversation with the always-outspoken Onaiyekan included the following highlights:

- The 2009 Synod for Africa generated important 'dreams' that remain valid, even if it's impossible to point to any corrupt leader whose regime fell as a result, and even if it can't be said that 'we've been able to install three or four saints as heads of state.'
- The 'Occupy Wall Street' movement is a positive sign, he said, because it means the criticism of the global economic system long voiced by Africa and other third world peoples is finally 'coming home to roost' in the West.
- On-going international intervention in Africa, such as the NATO campaign in Libya and the French

involvement in Ivory Coast, has left many Africans suspicious of the 'international community,' and openly wondering: 'Who's really in charge in Africa?'

- Pope Benedict's insistence that the church must not be 'immediately engaged' in politics, according to Onaiyekan, doesn't mean it can't be politically relevant 'including telling corrupt politicians to 'shape up or quit.'
- Onaiyekan candidly acknowledged that bishops in Africa face their own challenges of good government, including the need to develop solid accounting practices, and to make sure their reliance on government largesse doesn't muzzle their criticism. He also said that some African bishops bristle at new demands for accountability and transparency, grumbling that 'you didn't ask all this of the white man who came before me!'
- There's no real need for a formal dialogue with African traditional religions, Onaiyekan argued, because so many African Catholics experience that dialogue in their own hearts and their own families.
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The full text of the interview appears below.

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Interview with Archbishop John Onaiyekan

November 19, 2011

What's the significance of Benedict's second trip to Africa?

A papal visit to Africa is always important. This one, of course, comes in connection with the promulgation of the post-synodal exhortation. The second Synod for Africa probably didn't have the same impact in terms of making news as the first one, which was historic. That doesn't mean. However, that doesn't mean the topic and the concerns of the second African synod are any less important. The issues of reconciliation, justice and peace, and how the church can be both a sign and an instrument of those things in the African context of today, are crucial. We're expecting that the pope's visit 'just the fact that the pope visited ' will put more force behind whatever we may begin to do later, when the document is handed over to the African church to implement.

We're now two years after that second Synod for Africa. Can you identify its most important concrete results?

To assess what the synodal event accomplished isn't so straight-forward. You cannot say, for instance, that because of the synod, a particular corrupt government has been overturned. One would have wanted it, but you can't say that. You also can't say that as a result of the synod, we've been able to install three or four saints as heads of state in various countries. These were the dreams of the second African synod. They may be dreams, but they're still very much valid, and we're not giving up on them.

The struggles of African nations don't just depend on a synod of bishops, of course, but they're affected by many other forces around us. I'm not so sure that we're even as clear in our minds as we once were about what exactly is moving in Africa. There's a lot to clarify in the whole area of public life and political institutions. We've had any number of heads of state who were around for thirty or forty years, but we're now also getting some new kinds of political leadership in Africa. In every nation, there's a ferment for something new.

We also have to put Africa's situation in the context of world events. If we look at them carefully, they have their positive and negative dimensions.

On the positive side, the economic structures of the developed nations, which have held sway for so long, are being challenged from within. I feel that we now have an opportunity. We in Africa, third world peoples, have been complaining that this architecture is not correct. Not only does it not lead to our good, but it's made the whole world economically dislocated. When we're hearing this said, and we see people camping in Wall Street and all over the world, it tells us that finally, the chickens are coming home to roost.

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Negatively, there is this thing called the "international community," which is a very nebulous expression. People wonder, what kind of animal is it? We have seen it operating in Africa, even in the famous so-called "Arab Spring." For example, there was the part played by NATO in practically ensuring the revolutions in North Africa went a particular way. We might also mention Ivory Coast, and the role of the French there. If we want to be clear, if the French had not intervened, we'd probably still be talking about it. I don't mean it would have better or worse, but it would not have been settled. When we see such things, we begin to wonder: Who is running affairs in Africa? Are we really in charge? Who's being sent to the Hague, for example? Who decides who goes to the Hague and who doesn't? Gaddafi had been in Libya for forty years, and as far as we were concerned, he was a head of state in good standing. Then, all of a sudden – so sudden, in fact, that he didn't appreciate it. He was so sure that all of Libya would fight until the end for him, until he finally realized that it wasn't so. All of this, there's a narrative going on which is cause for concern.

What all this means is that there's need for greater responsibility on the part of people who claim to be ruling Africa now. Whoever rules Africa must be able to rule with their people. If you don't enjoy the support of people, if you rule as the result of rigged elections or whatever, you can't fight for your people. What we're expecting is that the ideas that came out of the second African synod, now that the document is out, will give us something to hold onto to guide this discussion.

In the pope's document, one of the themes is that the church should stay out of politics. The pope insists the gospel is not a political message, the church is not a political party, and clergy are not supposed to be political leaders. How do you reconcile that with your vision of the church playing a big role in reflection on Africa's political future?

Honestly, I don't think the problem is that serious. It's not as if you can't be politically relevant if you don't enter politics. I think that's a false dilemma. I always tell people that when we say that priests cannot join a political party or hold political office, we're not the only ones in that situation. Anyone whose role in society demands that he or she be neutral must be like us – for example, members of the armed forces or the judiciary. That doesn't mean judges are completely irrelevant, or that they don't care, how the political processes are unfolding. That's where we come in. The political goals we fight for are not in any way partisan. When, as a bishop, I insist that elections should be free and fair, and when I see a rigged election and shout "foul," that doesn't mean I've taken sides with those who lost. It's simply that I'm insisting on truth and justice. Even if the politicians accuse me [of bias], so be it.

There's a wide range of areas where we can make a difference that we haven't even begun, to say nothing of finishing, before we start taking jobs as ministers in a government. Let's start with training our people in catechesis, including catechesis in the social doctrines of the church. We have a lot of work to do. Very often, corrupt regimes feed on the ignorance of the people. Whatever we can do to tackle that ignorance will help. I'm not talking, by the way, about ignorance of math or biology, but of their rights,

and of course their duties. It's a kind of ignorance that shouldn't be tolerable for any group of people. The church should be able to do something about that, with regular programs teaching people about Catholic social doctrine, organizing people to start talking about these things among themselves. All this can be done across partisan political lines.

There's also the challenge of drawing in the political elites, whether Catholic or not, to help them to appreciate what role they ought to play and see how we can help them.

Also hold them accountable when they fail?

The synod message came out very clearly on this matter. It went so far as to tell our Catholic politicians that if they cannot perform, they should let others do the job. Shape up or quit, and we meant it. We said that by doing this badly, you're giving yourself and the church a bad name. All this is probably still at the level of dreams and aspirations, but I don't think it's a long dream or one that's far-fetched. It's not impossible. What we need to do now is work out the logistics of which programs would actually be effective in this regard. It will take time.

How else can the church in Africa change the culture?

One impulse that came from the first synod, which is still taking shape, is realization that we need Catholic universities in Africa. There's an irony that the Catholic church has done more than probably any other group in Africa, but when you look around, it's mostly educating children in primary schools or, at most, secondary schools. Until very recently, our young people who finished secondary school went to state universities or they went abroad to universities everywhere. As a result, they hardly ever get their professional training and intellectual formation in a Catholic atmosphere. I've met many Catholic doctors, for instance, who passed through medical schools in Nigeria. The closest thing they ever got to any kind of medical ethics came in meager courses on those things a doctor can't do in order to avoid getting into trouble with the law. They never got into the whole area of the healing love of Jesus, or the relationship between the care that a doctor gives and the healing that God himself performs, which are very serious issues. It's all the more interesting because all this was so clear in our traditional religious systems. The traditional healer was very aware that God heals through him, which is equally true for the consulting cardiologist. They should be told that, but we haven't had much time to get there. The result is that you find Catholic doctors, often very good Catholics – members of the Legion of Mary, charismatics, people who go to church regularly – but there's a disconnect with their faith. The same point applies to law, and politics, and other fields.

Between the first synod and now, many countries in Africa have started projects to found Catholic universities.

How many in Nigeria?

Right now, there are three which are actually moving. The first one is called "Madonna University, started by a priest. He's now started a second one, called "Caritas University." The bishops' conference has started a Catholic University of Nigeria. We began in a temporary campus down in the southern part of Nigeria, but eventually the permanent site will be in Abuja. The model is the Catholic University of America. I don't know how difficult it was for the American hierarchy to build that university, but I do know it's quite a challenge for us. We believe the idea is a good one.

Are you looking for financial support from overseas, such as American Catholic backing?

To get started, yes. Our conviction is that once it's underway, and you can build a reasonable number of students, the fees will cover the costs.

You've spoken about the church challenging corrupt regimes. In the exhortation, the pope says the church can't be credible in attacking corruption on the outside if it isn't transparent and accountable in its internal practices. In other words, he's calling for 'good government' in the African church. What do you make of that?

If you're asking if there are some bishops in Africa who might transfer funds given for one purpose into something else, even into their personal use, it's not impossible. It happens that sometimes bishops feel obliged to apply funds given for one thing to another project, with the best of intentions, because they feel pressure. We've come to understand, however, that in the long run, that's counter-productive.

We also have situations in which the bishop's office, or his whole set-up, is extremely rudimentary. He may not even have a computer, and he'll say that we have no money to employ accountants. We collect the money, we spend it, we don't steal it, but we don't keep track of it. We do not give any report. Of course, those who give money say, we want clarity about where it goes. We've had that kind of problem. More and more, of course, we're beginning to realize that it's not enough to say, 'I didn't steal the money.' It has to be clearly tracked and shown what happened to it. We used to joke that we've been working on the basis of the gospel teaching, that your right hand should not know what your left hand is doing, so we're not used to knowing what we're doing with our money! Now, of course, we realize that we need to get proper offices and get our accounts in good shape.

What I think will help in that regard is the transition from depending upon foreign grants to asking our own people to give us money. When that happens, accountability necessarily becomes crucial. People will not give you money if they cannot see why you want it. If you tell people how much money you need and what you want it for, how it will be spent, you're amazed at how generous people will be.

To be honest, the new pressure bothers some of our bishops, because the bishops who came before were not subjected to all this. Some African bishops will actually say, 'Why are you asking me all this? You didn't ask the white man who came before me!' But, of course, things have changed. Many bishops already take this very seriously, and because it's in the exhortation, many more will do so.

If a bishop is corrupt himself, he certainly has no moral justification for accusing anyone else of corruption. The real problem, however, isn't bishops stealing money for whatever reason. What's more common, and more subtle, is when church leaders have a kind of good relationship with corrupt leaders, which translates into these corrupt leaders being nice to the church. It's usually for good purposes, but it's difficult to receive these gifts and still comment publicly and to blame them. This is a challenge we all have. Whatever relationship we have with those who control our national resources, it should never make us unable to tell the truth. In Nigeria, we have a saying that it's not good to eat and talk at the same time! We all need very careful discernment.

In my own personal experience, I don't have too many scruples accepting donations made to the church by wealthy people, even though I know that in the Nigerian context it's difficult to very rich doing clean business. My view is, these resources belong to the people. If they return to them through me, that's good. It will not stop me, however, from doing my duty and preaching the gospel. I don't do this, it's not right. If somebody brings me money and says he wants to thank God for his blessings, it's not my job to investigate how he made his money. That's the job of the government, and I keep telling the government to do their job. If in the meantime, I want to build a church in a village and somebody says I want to give you money for it, I accept it and I thank them.

I presume that if somebody came to you and said, I'll give you x amount of money if you shut up about the government, you would say no to that?

Obviously, I would say no. Even if he threatens me, I would say, go ahead, do whatever you like, but I must tell the truth. I must say that in Nigeria, our own experience is that all those government people leave us in peace. They don't disturb us. In fact, that's the worrisome part of it ? they don't disturb us. We can do whatever we like, and it's like water rolling off the back of a duck.

You wish they would react more?

Exactly. As Jesus shows, it's when you are dragged before tribunals that you can witness. If they don't do that, how will you witness? If all they say is, "Oh, bishop, wonderful sermon," what then?

This morning, Pope Benedict went to the Vatican of voodoo in Ouidah. What can you say about the relationship between the Catholic church and voodoo in Africa?

What's called "voodoo" here in the Republic of Benin is very much a Benin reality. Other parts of Africa have the practice of African traditional religions, which would not be like the voodoo here. For example, we would not call the Yoruba religion voodoo. By the time you go to East Africa, you're in a different world altogether. If the question is about the church and what's called "voodoo" here, it's really a question for the church in Benin. You've seen that in Ouidah, the Catholic church and the voodoo python temple are right opposite one another ? it shows that this religion is very prominent here in Benin. You'd hardly see such a thing in Nigeria.

What's the relationship with traditional religion like in Nigeria?

I like to tell everybody that I'm a Yoruba man. I have inherited and retained the faith of my ancestors in Olorun, who is God, the one God. My father became a Christian, and he says that the priest told him the story of Jesus, the son of Olorun. Having heard the story of Calvary and the works and teachings of Jesus, he completely fell in love with that Jesus, the son of Olorun.

Now, the Yoruba religion has room for orisha, which is often incorrectly translated as "gods" or "divinities." In the Yoruba religion, there's actually no room for "gods" with a small "g." Ask any Yoruba how many gods there are, and he'll tell you: "There's only one God, God almighty." When it comes to devotional practices and so on, it's these smaller spiritual entities which attract the people, and priests are priests of these different entities. "Orisha" is the same word you find in Latin America, especially in Brazil and Cuba, which is where Yoruba religion went.

When we used to see my uncles and aunts who did not become Christians, and we would see them practice their faith, we didn't say they were following the devil. We simply said, they worship orisha, just like we worship Jesus.

Does the church have some formal dialogue with these traditional religions?

I see the dialogue inside myself. My father told me very bluntly that when he became a Catholic, he did not take on a new god. He has reconciled it within himself. He does not condemn what our ancestors did, but he says I do not need to go that way anymore. I have more serious access to Olorun now, which is the access my ancestors were struggling to find. It's like St. Paul's reference to the difference between seeing through a mirror vaguely, versus seeing face-to-face. If you come to a place like Nigeria, most people

simply take it in stride that there are African traditional religions. They won't go as far as to say they're in 'dialogue' with them, because it's already part of their lives.

It wouldn't occur to Catholics in Nigeria that you need a formal dialogue, because they experience it themselves?

Yes. What we try to do is appreciate how much of what we have as Christians was already in our traditional religions. Therefore, we're proud of it, not ashamed. On the other hand, we also realize that there are always, in every culture, certain aspects that need to be purified or abandoned. That's hardly just an African experience - it's happened to the Irish, it happens to everybody. To the extent there's a dialogue, this is what it's about. What are those things as a Christian we can carry on, and which are the things we can no longer get involved in. It it's the latter, that doesn't mean it's devilish. We still respect it. Here in Benin is a place where you really see a lot of that happening, which is why whenever we're looking for a representative of traditional African religion, we almost always end up in this small African country.

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