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Leading African prelate backs 'zero tolerance' on abuse

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NCR Today

ROME -- One of Africa's leading Catholic prelates this week endorsed a strong 'zero tolerance' policy on child sexual abuse, saying that 'to abuse the trust of a child, an innocent child, is something we cannot tolerate.'

Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, also candidly acknowledged that until recently, Catholic leaders across Africa believed that 'child abuse is not our problem,' but he said they're now coming to see it happens in Africa too -- including, he said, within the Catholic church.

Pengo said he would back any victim or parent who wishes to report child abuse to police and prosecutors, but also said that in some African societies civil governments lack the capacity to deal with the problem, or simply believe they have 'more important things to do.'

Pengo made the comments in a February 15 interview with *NCR*, on the margins of a Rome meeting between African and European bishops. He is the elected president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, the umbrella group for all the bishops' conferences on the continent.

On other fronts, Pengo, 67, voiced fears that the growing number of African priests serving in the States risks exacerbating already serious shortages in Africa, especially because those priests tend to be the 'cream of the crop.' He called for joint programs of formation, which would feed new African priests back to Africa as well as Europe and the United States.

Pengo also said that at least in Tanzania, a country of 43 million that's 60 percent Christian and 35 percent Muslim, tensions between Christianity and Islam are 'not home grown.'

Instead, Pengo blamed two forms of fundamentalism – Islamic fundamentalism, exported to Africa by oil states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, and what he described as “Christian fundamentalism,” meaning aggressive evangelical groups often backed by Christians in the United States.

Without those two external forces, Pengo argued, Christians and Muslims in his country could “work things out.”

The following is a transcript of the interview.

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What kind of practical support does the church in Africa need?

We have several needs. The first one, for me, would be personnel for formation. I don’t mean personnel for parochial or pastoral assignments, because in that sense we have, not enough, but we’re slightly better off than in Europe. Our weak point is that we have vocations of young people to the priesthood and religious life, but we do not have enough sufficiently qualified formators and that’s one of the things we need from the European episcopal conferences. We also don’t have enough material resources for this formation, so we need material support to develop the vocations we have.

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By material support, do you mean money?

It’s money, yes, but also other possibilities for our young people. Rather than limiting them to the training they receive in Africa, it would also be good if they could be given facilities to come to study in Europe, scholarships and so on. On that point, however, there’s a bit of reluctance on the part of the African bishops, in the sense that when young people come to Europe for study, they soon find life more comfortable here and they don’t want to come home. Even when they do come home, they feel so uneasy they look for means to go back to Europe. The ideal would be that they are formed in Africa, and then after that they could come here for training in specializations, rather than being formed already as seminarians in Europe. That often presents a problem.

In the United States, the number of priests from Africa serving in the country is rapidly growing. Yet when you look at the numbers, we have one priest for every 1,300 Catholics, while in sub-Saharan Africa it’s one priest for every 4,800 Catholics.

In some places, it’s even worse than that.

So the question has to be asked: Aren’t your priests more needed at home?

They’re certainly more needed at home. Another disadvantage is that for an African priest to be accepted in American society, he needs to be better qualified than the ones who remain at home. So, there’s a tendency of taking the cream of the crop. The last time I was in the States, I was in Washington and Baltimore to meet with CRS, and I talked with the American bishops about this. I told them that probably the best thing would be to try to form priests who are highly qualified together, in conjunction, and then say that for every five qualified priests, we can keep three in Africa and two can go to the States. At the same time, we also have to make sure that those who go to the States don’t mean to stay there forever. They should be prepared to come back.

If it's true that African priests are more needed at home, why do their bishops allow them to go to Europe or the States?

It may be for various reasons. The sad fact is, some of the priests who come to the United States don't actually do it with the full permission of their bishops. There are some bishops in the United States who think they can kind of grab priests from Africa to come because of the need there. Normally, priests who are prepared to be grabbed aren't the best priests. They'll come, but often even the bishop who recruited him starts to regret it. I would say to the bishops in the States that it's better to have a proper arrangement between the bishops in Africa and themselves.

There are also weaknesses on the part of the bishops in Africa, who find themselves in such great material need, financial need, and they think that by sending a priest to the States, he'll bring in something for the support of their church.

Does it actually work that way?

In some places, yes. Normally, within the arrangement that's made, the dioceses in Africa would get some money from the States. Of course, among the many African priests who are going to the States, there are also many religious. Often, they have a whole group of priests working in the States, and there's a certain remuneration they get in agreement with their own congregations.

Do you ever feel there's a danger this could become a kind of colonial exploitation, that we're taking your best and brightest because we have more money than you do?

That's a danger, and there are certain cases of that kind. I wouldn't generalize. In general, people have good intentions. It's important for there to be good communication, so that what happens benefits everyone.

There's a consistory this week. Of the eighteen new voting cardinals, thirteen are Europeans (the Italians alone have seven) and three are from North America, but not a single African. Are you disappointed?

For me personally, I wouldn't feel it's a concern. That criticism, however, has also come up in Tanzania, before I came here. It's not limited to Europe, it's also been expressed in Africa. I would explain it by saying that most of the Italians are heads of Vatican congregations, so the problem may be the choice of those heads of the congregations. If it were possible to have a wider choice of heads of congregations, we'd probably have less of this criticism. For Africa, of course, we always want to have one or more cardinals. I must admit that for us, the last consistory seemed more fair. [Note: In the consistory of November 2010, three Africans became cardinals.]

In the conclave of April 2005, Americans had 11 cardinals, the same number as all of Africa, even though Africa has twice the Catholic population. Does that strike you as unfair?

I wouldn't say it's unfair. The church in the United States is older than the church in Africa, for the most part. It's not simply a matter of choosing cardinals according to the size of the continent. We also need a certain experience of the church, which comes with age. So, we can understand this.

Benedict XVI has made two trips to Africa, one to Cameroon and Angola in 2009 and another to Benin in 2011. What was the importance of those trips?

No matter where, a visit of the Holy Father to Africa is always a sign of the universality of the church, and also a sort of appreciation of what is taking place in the church in Africa, that the Holy Father finds time to come to us. It's an indication that he's very much concerned and interested in what is taking place. The people perceive this, and they take it in that line. Of course, we know that the present Holy Father is not as young as John Paul II, who came to Africa sixteen times. That this pope, at his age, has managed to come to Africa twice in a period of three years, is very much appreciated by everyone.

In Benin, the pope came to present the concluding document from the second Synod for Africa. Can you point to some concrete outcomes from that document?

At the moment, it may be a bit too early to start doing that. I know that in the episcopal conference in Tanzania, we have been studying the document and we've been following up with small groups studying it. We always insist that it's the Holy Father himself who came to Africa and gave us this document, so we must appreciate it by working on it as concretely as possible.

Is there a particular message in the document that struck you?

It's the entire theme of the message: "Justice, Peace and Reconciliation". Those are the values which are most needed on the continent. Look at the number of wars which have taken place, and after the war there's always a tearing apart of the societies, so we need reconciliation. Also, in most African governments, there's a lack of justice on the part of the leaders. They fall into tribalism, or self-centeredness, or corruption. The message of the Holy Father is really appropriate and to the point of what we need.

Last week there was a symposium at the Gregorian University on the child sexual abuse crisis in the church. The purpose was to make sure the church all around the world has clear policies. Where do you think the church in Africa stands in terms of its readiness to take on that issue?

So far, the church in Africa has been – and, I must add, wrongly – a bit self-satisfied, thinking that child abuse is not our problem. I don't think that's the case. Slowly, we are realizing that there's also a lot of child abuse in Africa.

Including in the church in Africa?

Yes, including the church in Africa. Maybe the numbers are not as high as it may appear elsewhere, but it does happen. It's a problem, and it must be dealt with. We bishops need to be aware of the possibility this is happening, and we should take measures against it. I have to say that until recently, we didn't think it was our problem, so the measures we've taken haven't really been substantial.

Do the bishops of Tanzania have policies on clerical sexual abuse?

Not yet.

Will you have policies by May, which is the Vatican deadline?

Yes.

In terms of those policies, we've heard Vatican officials say that the church should fully cooperate with civil authorities whenever there is an accusation of sexual abuse. The idea is that these cases shouldn't just be handled inside the church, but they should also be turned over to police and civil prosecutors. Do you agree with that?

I would agree, in the sense that if the government is prepared to deal with the problem, we must be willing to cooperate. But for some parts of Africa, to put the problem in the hands of the government would surprise even the government itself. They're not capable of dealing with, and they're not prepared for it. They think they have more important problems to deal with.

In the Archdiocese of Dar-es-Salaam, if someone told you their child was abused by a priest, would you report that priest to the police?

I would try first to solve this within the ecclesiastical realm. If the parent, however, insisted that this must be a case of public justice, I wouldn't hesitate to report it. I would leave the choice to the victim or the parents.

In the United States, the bishops have a "zero tolerance" policy on abuse, meaning that if a priest commits one act of child abuse, that priest is permanently removed from ministry. Do you agree with that policy?

I would very much agree with that. Any case [of child abuse], even if it's just one, is one too many. The trust which the society has for priests to take care of young people is so important, that we cannot allow it in any way to be frustrated. There are so many children who go to their priests innocently, as if they were going to their parents. To abuse that trust of a child, an innocent child, is something we cannot tolerate. That's why I say I agree completely with "zero tolerance".

Do you want to see the bishops across Africa implement that policy?

I very much want that, very much so.

Since Tanzania is a mixed Christian/Muslim society, can I also ask you how you see the current state of Muslim/Christian relations?

That's among the things we're talking about during our meetings this week, and it concerns the church in Africa very much. In Tanzania, the relationships have always been very good between Muslims and Christians. We've enjoyed a peaceful coexistence, to the extent that in some families you have both Christians and Muslims. During the past few decades, however, we've had this group of fundamentalists coming into our society, financed by Petrodollars from Saudi Arabia, also Libya, and Iran. They've created a situation which is not very friendly or favorable. During this meeting, we've been trying to make one another aware of the fact that Islam in some parts of Africa can be a social problem ? not Islam as such, but the presence of these fundamentalists.

At the same time, we realize that fundamentalism isn't just on the side of Islam. There is a certain kind of fundamentalism from the Christian community, particularly these evangelical groups, which can be a source of tension. Of course, for Muslims, as long as you're not a Muslim, then you're a Christian. They don't distinguish among us.

Are these evangelical groups in your country supported from the outside?

Yes. Those born in Africa aren't quite as bad, because in a sense they don't have the possibility of making too much noise. We also have groups, however, that are funded from outside.

Especially the United States?

I would say so, yes. Those come, of course, with material goods, and they have loudspeakers and so on,

so they make a lot of noise. They're confrontational with Muslims. Because of that, they make Muslims confrontational with us.

Facing these two kinds of fundamentalism, what do you do?

We try whatever we can in the ecumenical dialogue, but some of these groups don't want to dialogue. The main thing is, we try to reach out to good Muslims, to tell them there are differences between us. We may all be called Christians, but not every Christian has a fundamentalist attitude. It's a very tough task.

Do you also have to teach your people that not every Muslim is a fundamentalist?

Yes, yes. That has to always be our position. I must say that in Tanzania, that has very much been the situation.

Are you saying that if the oil states and the United States would both stop exporting fundamentalism to you, the Africans could work all this out?

I think so! In this world, of course, you can't keep people out. But, I can say that the problems between Christians and Muslims in Tanzania are for the most part not home-grown problems.

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