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Preparations for African Synod

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All Things Catholic

On Tuesday, the Vatican

released the *lineamenta*, or "grand lines," for the Second Synod of Bishops for Africa. The first Synod for Africa met in 1994, and resulted in the document *Ecclesia in Africa*. No date has been established for the next synod, although responses to the *lineamenta* were requested by the end of October 2008, making it unlikely the synod will be held before 2009.

The theme will be, "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace."

In church terms, it's a very *ad extra* choice, meaning that it's primarily concerned with the church's engagement with the outside world rather than internal questions of doctrine, discipline, or liturgical practice. That's in keeping with the pastoral priorities of most African bishops, who find issues such as poverty, war, and public corruption far more pressing than the *ad intra* issues that loom large in Western debates.

The *lineamenta* says that the church in Africa has made "a preferential choice for the poor."

Dialogue with African Traditional Religions and with Islam is also flagged as a challenge. In keeping with the blunt spirit under Benedict

XVI, the *lineamenta* acknowledges that Islam is an "important yet difficult" dialogue partner, and insists upon "reciprocity" as a cornerstone of the relationship -- meaning that majority Islamic states must respect the religious freedom of minorities.

The document suggests that it is time for a serious mobilization of the laity in Africa, leading lay Christians to look beyond their individual, tribal or ethnic interests, towards a "a large-scale, resolute" commitment to the broader public good. As part of that effort, the *lineamenta* encourages the church to foster a deeper ethic of "work done well," taking one's daily work as the pathway both to individual sanctity and to broader social transformation.

The *lineamenta* closes by asking bishops' conferences, religious orders, and other forces in the African church to respond to 32 questions in order to help shape the *instrumentum laboris*, or "working paper," of the synod.

One criticism that will likely be heard is that with its *ad extra* focus, the *lineamenta* neglects some important questions within the church. To take just a few examples:

- The problem of priestly formation, ensuring that new priests have fully integrated the spiritual and disciplinary requirements of the office;
- Inculturation of the faith in the various African contexts, especially in liturgy;
- The challenge of aggressive Pentecostal and evangelical sects, which are making inroads in many African countries, sometimes at the expense of the Catholic church;
- Debates over condoms in the context of HIV/AIDS, especially the question of the moral legitimacy of condoms in the context of a married couple trying to prevent transmission of the disease.

No doubt these issues, and others like them, will surface in the synod process. Nevertheless, the choice of the *lineamenta* to focus on broader social and political matters tends to reflect a conviction on the part of many African church leaders that getting hung up on internal debates is a bit like fiddling while Rome burns.

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