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Cardinal laments 'fatigue' of Christian Europe, celebrates African example

by Joshua J. McElwee

Papal canonizations

Rome — Christianity throughout Europe is "suffering from fatigue" and must look to the example of Christian churches in Africa for inspiration, a cardinal and one of the heads of the Vatican's councils said Thursday.

"We Europeans represent a form of Christianity that sometimes seems to be tired, suffering from fatigue," said Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the head of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

African Christianity, on the other hand, "shines as a beacon, as an example for other continents," he said.

Ravasi spoke Thursday at a two-day event hosted by the pan-African bishops' conference -- known as the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of African and Madagascar (SECAM) -- in celebration of the ceremonies Sunday at the Vatican canonizing Popes John XXIII and John Paul II.

The event, held at the Pontifical Urban University, is dedicated both as an homage to the role of the two popes on the African continent and a look-ahead to the role Africa will play in the church in the coming years. It is titled, "The Church in Africa: From the Second Vatican Council to the Third Millennium."

As the event opened Thursday, several speakers went to lengths to thank the two 20th-century pontiffs for their work to include Africans more prominently in the global church and wider society.

As one speaker at the conference put it: "These two popes decided to pull down the wall of racism."

"At a time when we were being marginalized, when racism was not even permitting us to breed ... [these

popes] said we are good," said Fr. John Egbulefu, a Nigerian theologian at the university.

Mentioning that John XXIII, who headed the church from 1958 to 1963, was the first pope to make an African prelate a cardinal, Egbulefu said, "To admit a man into the cardinals' college, that means to say he is capable of being pope."

"That was not a cheap action to undertake," Egbulefu said.

Likewise, Egbulefu said, John Paul II spoke out in the 1980s against the apartheid regime in South Africa, even refusing to kiss the country's ground when the papal plane was forced by weather to land there in 1988.

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Archbishop Gabriel Mbilingi, who heads the archdiocese of Lubango in Angola and is SECAM's president, said the canonizations are a "great event" for the church.

"If we are allowed to express in the African way the canonizations, we would say ... that we are at the eve of a celebration of a great event of our church, the family of God, in which two fathers will be given as a model for our life of faith," Mbilingi said.

Thursday and Friday's conference is being organized with the help of Pontifical Lateran University and the Vatican council. Talks at the conference have been taking place in Italian, French and English, with simultaneous translation provided into various other languages.

In his talk opening the event, Ravasi said he was glad it would focus on both the popes and "on the churches of Africa, which have their own characteristics." The cardinal admitted a certain culpability as a European, saying the "first characteristic" of the African church is "suffering, suffering which has often been brought about by the continent I represent."

The cardinal also said Africa's voice "isn't just a recent presence" in Christianity, mentioning that the Gospel writer Luke had listed places in Africa where Christian communities existed even in the first century.

"The voice of Africa isn't simply linked to the experience of Africa following colonialism," Ravasi said. "Quite the contrary, but at the origins of Christianity and through the 20th century, Africa was a true fundamental reference."

"It was the north star of Christian theology," the cardinal said, referencing writers from St. Augustine of Hippo to Tertullian.

Europeans, the cardinal continued, have many expectations of Africans. "We expect life, celebration and thought," he said. "Through your cultural and spiritual wealth, we can influence our respective cultures."

Mbilingi, the SECAM president, noted three characteristics about Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II in relation to the African church.

John, Mbilingi said, evinced a "pastoral goodness" that "is precious for a church that wants to construct itself as a family of God," a typical African phrase to describe the Catholic community. John, Mbilingi said, also pioneered the idea of "inculturation" -- a concept that Christians seeking to evangelize must

adapt to and respect the culture of those they work with.

John Paul II was responsible for the first worldwide meeting of Catholic bishops at the Vatican on the subject of Africa, held in 1994, and helped develop the idea of inculturation, Mbilingi said.

The conference, organized by the African bishops, continues Friday with a variety of talks, including:

- A reflection on the "joint dynamics" of the two bishops' synods on Africa, in 1994 and 2009, by Cardinal Peter Turkson, the head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace;
- A talk on prominent Christian figures in African academia from Edem Kodjo, a former prime minister of Togo and current president of the nonprofit organization Pax Africana;
- Testimonies from members of male and female African religious communities, including those founded on the continent;
- A talk on current ecclesial questions in Africa today by Bishop Barthélemy Adoukonou, the secretary of the Vatican's cultural council;
- Three short talks by African women on the "place and role of women in the Church and in society."

First to present on the last subject will be Holy Child Jesus Sr. Teresa Okure, a well-known biblical scholar and a theology professor at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Nigeria.

Joining her are Agnes Adjaho, the director of a Benin-based association of French-speaking African booksellers, and St. Andrew Sr. José Ngalula, a theologian at the Catholic University of the Congo in Kinshasa.

Ending the event on Friday, participants are to hear from Cardinal Francis Arinze, the retired prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

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