

Michael J. Milla (ed.) *Christ's New Homeland -Africa: Contribution to the Synod on the Family By African Pastors*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, USA. 2015.184pp.

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Christ's New Homeland – Africa: Contributions to the Synod on the Family by African Pastors is a collection of ten different essays by ten African prelates on questions or issues concerning marriage and family life, which were the major focus of both the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 2014 and the XIV General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held a year later (2015). This valuable piece of work nestles between these two Synods, which explains its dual character and function. On one hand, it takes a look at the outcome of the earlier Synod—the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops—and at the same time focuses its attention on the subsequent synod that was to take place. Much of the first gaze is concentrated on the *Relatio synodi* which was largely represented as the *Lineamenta* for the next synod assembly. The other gaze focuses on some specific pastoral concerns of the church in Africa which the authors hoped would receive some attention during the upcoming synod. Taking into cognizance this two-directional gaze of this book, it becomes much easier to understand and appreciate the differences in the tone, tenor, language and approach that one finds in this book.

On one hand, one notices the rasping and unrelenting criticisms which may appear shocking to persons that are very mindful of giving public offence and hence would rather opt for politically correct phraseologies. The first two articles particularly that of Robert Cardinal Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, makes no pretenses at all. One cannot miss out the combat mood of his article. But it is combat that is fought not by an appeal to emotions but rather with very deep, clear-sighted and almost irrefutable logic. His article clearly demonstrates a very keen mind that is able to untangle and expose, to the chagrin of his adversaries, the cryptic objectives and intentions that lie beneath subtle and presumably harmless phraseologies. Armed with a very sharp intellect, Cardinal Sarah dissects, piece by piece, the *Relatio synodi* of the Extraordinary synod thus exposing the hidden traps that unwary participants of the next Ordinary synod might fall into if they do not pay sufficient attention to the seemingly harmless expressions and ambiguous pastoral approaches that are inherent in the *Relatio synodi*. Cardinal Sarah unravels various instances of what may be described as cryptic subterfuges which he classifies under three headings: “a perplexing point”, “unacceptable, scandalous points”, and “a final surprise”. The emeritus Bishop of Conakry, Guinea is unapologetic that he represents a position that is clearly contradistinctive from that of the Older Churches. He concludes his essay by employing ingeniously, and somewhat polemically, an expression once used by Pope Paul VI when he referred to Africa as Christ's new homeland. He appears to suggest that just as Africa once gave refuge to the fleeing

family of Jesus some two millennia ago, so is she ready to offer the same hospitality to Jesus as some Herods in the Older churches attempt to snuff out his life through ambiguous or at best ambivalent pastoral practice dubbed mercy.

The essay following Cardinal Sarah's is that of Bishop Barthélemy Adoukonou who serves as the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican Curia. He sets out to examine "An African Take on the *Instrumentum laboris*". Although lacking the polemical tone that one finds in Cardinal Sarah's essay, his, however, was no less analytical, critical and insightful. The *instrumentum laboris* was meant to serve as a guide for discussions towards preparing for the XIV Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This Ordinary Assembly was meant to continue and extend the discussions on the vocation and mission of the family earlier begun at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. It was perhaps for this reason that much of what was found in both the *Relatio synodi* and *Lineamenta* were also reproduced in the *Instrumentum laboris*. There was, however, an enrichment of the *Relatio synodi* with newly contributed materials, Bishop Adoukonou observed. He sets out to examine these new contributions. Much of Bishop Adoukonou's essay dwelt, however, on the persisting difficulties that the *instrumentum laboris* failed to take cognizance of. Bishop Adoukonou, therefore, sets out to critically analyze these difficulties. He examined the methodological limitation of the working document which proposes a "new pastoral sensitivity" while completely ignoring the "original sin of postmodernity" as particularly embodied in the decadent culture of the so-called affluent and developed countries of the West, namely a firm decision to construct a world that excludes God. "The Church in the West" Bishop Adoukonou surmises, "would understand then that she should not agree to think of her pastoral practice in terms of such an anthropology", that is, a "godless anthropology". Bishop Adoukonou offers a number of useful suggestions that could help clear up the ambiguities, ambivalences, distortions, and errors that are contained in the *Instrumentum laboris*. He concludes by underscoring the absolute indispensability of "the spirit of discernment that is enlightened by the mystery of the Cross, which, itself, discerns spirits". This discerning spirit is key to clearing up 'all the confusions and to dismiss any alleged "new pastoral sensitivity" whose Christian criteria for validity are unknown.'

The three essays contained in the Second Part of this book captioned "The Gospel of the Family", set out to examine and reaffirm core principles of Christian marriage as contained in both Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Archbishop Denis Amuzu-Dzakupah of Lomé focuses his article on the importance of recent magisterial teaching on marriage and family. He briefly examines the contributions of the Second Vatican Council, the papal writings of Paul VI, John Paul II down to Pope Francis. Dwelling on the theme of the Indissolubility of Marriage, Philippe Cardinal Ouedraogo of the Metropolitan See of Ouagadougou highlights several factors that often constitute serious threats to this fundamental principle of marriage. The metropolitan Archbishop of Addis Abeba, Berhaneyesus D. Cardinal Souraphiel, proposes ways of accompanying married couples so as to promote better understanding of marriage, and thus, ensure greater stability of marriages.

The Third Part of this book is dedicated to specific pastoral concerns within the Church in Africa. Under the common theme of “Pastoral Care of Families that are Hurting”, four Metropolitan Archbishops examined various issues that demand delicate responses which nonetheless must not compromise the authentic teaching about marriage. These essays have a particular flavor that could only have come from years of dedicated pastoral ministry. Issues examined in this section of the book include polygamy, mixed and interfaith marriages, etc. A common element in the four essays is the fact that none of the contributors advocated the sort of pastoral response championed by some of their Western counterpart. While acknowledging the pastoral difficulties of couples who find themselves in certain marital situations, these prelates remain resolutely committed to the traditional pastoral practice of the Church.

The essay by Jean-Pierre Cardinal Kutwa, Archbishop of Abidjan brings the book to a conclusion. His is an important contribution to the discussion as it sets out to argue why the State must be concerned and indeed involved in the question of family and marriage. Governmental policies, as the essay highlights can impact either positively or negatively on the institution of marriage and family. Hence, the State’s involvement on this question becomes not only useful but necessary.

The book, *Christ’s New Homeland—Africa* marks a very important contribution and one might say coming of age of African prelates. It is often observed that when it comes to major ecclesiastical gatherings such as Synods of Bishops or other important assemblies, or on burning questions of great importance, there is often a notable loud absence or silent presence of African voices. And when they appear to make some audible sound at all, they merely reecho the voices of others, particularly those of the churches in Europe. This book, however, represents a significant shift particularly as these African prelates, speaking on behalf of their other African brethren, have chosen not only to raise their voices loud and clear but to raise them in clear opposition to other voices including the voices of their financial benefactors in Europe particularly. One cannot but applaud the courage of these African prelates. Not fearing either losing the much needed financial support from the older churches or being marginalized and pushed farther to the periphery of the power structure of the universal church, these African prelates dared to raise their voices against the powerful voices of the bishops of the western churches.

But what is remarkable is that their raised voices were not filled with empty or noisy sounds. On the contrary, they were voices filled with articulate and intelligent sounds. The analytic, critical and incisive approach that is particularly found in the first two essays and in others as well lends credence to this. The book reveals an image of Pastors who are both intellectually sound, orthodox and yet pastorally sensitive to the challenges faced by members of their flock.

The assertiveness with which these prelates articulated their arguments and positions points to a growing consciousness of Africa’s place and role in the life, mission and future of the

Catholic Church. The conviction that the prelates of the Church in Africa are the future custodians of the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of the Church is almost palpable. Along this is the corresponding willingness to take up that mandate even at the cost of possibly losing favour with those older but richer churches which would rather prefer to see a change in the pastoral practices towards individuals and couples in certain irregular state.

On the flip side, one would expect a spread that sufficiently takes into consideration the diverse regions of Africa. Beside the Cardinal Archbishop of Addis Abeba, the rest of the contributors are all from the Francophone countries. There is, therefore, a noticeable lopsidedness. This lopsidedness is further accentuated by the fact that there no contributions from the Eastern and Southern part of Africa. In fact, one can easily conclude that the book is the effort of prelates of French West and Central Africa. In that case it raises the serious question as to how much the opinion expressed in these essays are representative of the hierarchy of the Church in Africa. What is even more surprising is that not even a single contribution came from Nigeria, which has a sizeable number of Bishops in the African continent. The fact that Francis Cardinal Arinze wrote the preface does not mitigate this deficiency.

I am not convinced that the essays in the third Part of the book sufficiently addressed some important pastoral questions with regard to marriage and family in Africa or at least in some African culture and societies particularly in those societies that still have strong attachment to their traditional culture even when they have embraced the Christian faith. One example would be the premium placed on children in most African societies. This value in some cultures appears to sometime relativize the importance of marriage. Again the inability of many local churches in Africa, Nigeria for example, to deal with the problematic of dual weddings, that is, traditional and church weddings, wasn't given any attention.

A major shortcoming of this book is the failure to raise the question and respond to the major challenge of hundreds of thousands of young ladies who, for a number of reasons, are constrained to live the state of unmarried life. So while the book, particularly the third Part, raises and discusses the pastoral concern and care extended to persons or couples in certain states or conditions, e.g. polygamy, divorce, single parenthood, divorced and remarried, etc., no awareness much less pastoral solicitude is shown towards hundreds of thousands of young ladies who did not willingly choose to live the state of unmarried life. But it is not only the prelates of the church in Africa who failed to recognize the enormous burden of this sizeable percentage of their flock but also the prelates of the universal church gathered at both the Extraordinary and Ordinary Assembly of the synods of Bishops equally failed to take into consideration this significant portion of their sheep thereby consigning them to the periphery of the Church's life and mission.

But in all, credit must be given to these African prelates who through their various contributions decided that the voice and opinions of the church in Africa must not only count but be given serious consideration. It is an important work which must be read alongside with

other documents and writings that emerged from these two Synods and particularly alongside Pope Francis' recently published Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.