

# A CONTINENT ON THE MARGINS

By PETER J. HENRIOT

Contemporary Africa can be compared to the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; he fell among robbers who stripped him, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead (cf. Lk 10:30–37). Africa is a continent where countless human beings – men and women, children and young people – are lying, as it were, on the edge of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalised and abandoned. They are in great need of Good Samaritans who will come to their aid. (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n 41)

**I**N THESE DRAMATIC WORDS of gospel reflection, John Paul II provides a vivid image of the conditions and challenges of ‘a continent on the margins’. His message comes in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, delivered in September 1995, sixteen months after the close of the historic African Synod.<sup>1</sup> The Synod (‘Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops’) drew together over 300 bishops and others (90 per cent of whom were African) for four weeks of deliberation in Rome in April and May 1994. It was coincidentally marked at its opening by the tragedy in Rwanda, and at its closing by the triumph of the overthrow of the apartheid regime of South Africa.

Throughout the Synod, the members spoke in moving terms of the issues that faced them in their efforts to share the Good News. *Ecclesia in Africa* mentions a litany of these – issues that represent individuals, facts that have faces:

- terrible and increasing poverty
- tragic mismanagement of the few available resources
- political instability and social chaos
- urbanisation, population increase and other demographic pressures
- unemployment
- the international debt
- the arms trade
- problems of refugees and displaced persons
- families uprooted and facing various dangers
- need for the liberation of women

- the spread of AIDS
- the practice of slavery in some places
- tribalism and ethnic conflict
- the craving for material possessions
- the spread of a non-religious, secular idea of life
- the negative impact of the media<sup>2</sup>

As a result of such a situation, Africa is perceived by many outsiders as the 'lost continent'. In *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II quotes a Synodal remark: 'One common situation, without doubt, is that Africa is full of problems . . . In a world controlled by rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected' (n 40).

Why does this tragic situation prevail in Africa? In a continent rich with natural resources, why is there so much poverty? In a culture marked by strong human values and qualities, why is there so much conflict? Is Africa indeed destined to become ever more a continent on the margin? And, relevant to our considerations in this special issue of *The Way*, what effect does this situation have on African spirituality?

### *Analysis of the African context*

To understand the contemporary situation of Africa, I believe that at least three basic attitudes are required. First, there is the need to recognize that Africa is not a homogeneous whole. Sub-Saharan Africa (the area I will mainly concentrate on in this article) is richly diverse in itself and is also notably distinct from northern Africa. Second, a critical social analysis of the historical foundations as well as the present-day influences is essential for appreciating the complex factors that have marginalized and continue to marginalize Africa. And third, an honest look at the positive forces moving inside Africa today is necessary to overcome the 'compassion fatigue' that can all too readily overtake the observer, whether African or non-African.

A full social analysis is beyond the scope of this present article.<sup>3</sup> But what I can suggest in summary form here is some historical analysis and topical identification that will provide at least a background for understanding the position of Africa today in the global community.

To begin with, we must acknowledge that Africa for the past five hundred years has not been free from outside interference. This has been an interference fundamentally hostile to the full integral development of its people.

The first period of interference was marked by the imposition of the *slave trade*. Arab traders on the eastern part of the continent and

European traders on the western part brutally robbed Africa of its most precious and essential resource, strong and talented humans, women and men who should have been the builders of the future of their own lands. The precise number of slaves extracted from Africa is in dispute – estimates range anywhere from two to ten million. But the consequences of the slave trade, especially as practised by the Christian nations of Europe such as the Portuguese, is indisputable.

First, there was the cruel suffering endured by the captured slaves, vast numbers of whom did not survive the journey to the New World. Second, the credibility of a Christian message of the freedom offered by Jesus to his followers was effectively damaged by the vigorous promotion and imposition of slavery by Christian invaders who found more support than challenge from their own church leaders.<sup>4</sup> Third, the practice of the slave trade reinforced a psychology of dominance whereby the white race was seen as superior to the black race which was often not even regarded as fully human. Such a racist mentality (often internalized by Africans themselves) would survive the suppression of the slave trade and be institutionalized in colonial patterns throughout the continent and in the apartheid regime of South Africa.

The second period of interference was that of the colonial dominance, the result of the so-called 'scramble for Africa'. When representatives of the several European states with interests in Africa gathered around a table in Berlin in 1885, the map that was drawn was mainly a reinforcement of already existing lines of colonial hegemony. The common colonial interest of powers such as England, France, Belgium, Portugal, Germany and Italy was *economic*. With the end of the slave trade by the mid-1880s, other resources attracted the eyes of outsiders to the assets of Africa. Minerals and agricultural riches were exploited with little or no concern for the consequences – economic, social, environmental – that such activity had on the local populations.

It may be true that *colonialism* brought some incidental advantages to parts of Africa. A physical infrastructure (roads, railways, electricity) was developed and social institutions such as hospitals and schools were introduced. But we can safely make a generalization that is accurate for most of the continent: colonial policies and practices were *primarily* designed and executed for the benefit of the colonial powers and not for the indigenous peoples. The consequences of such orientation became all the more obvious with the passing of the colonial era and are still experienced today in many of the conflictual situations.

The third period of outside interference continues to today, the period of *neo-colonialism*. The struggle of the 1950s and 1960s that

gave birth to most of the independent African states resulted in political independence, but not economic independence. As John Paul II remarks in *Ecclesia in Africa*, 'In the present world order, the African nations are among the most disadvantaged' (n 114). This disadvantage is a result of the structures of the world economic and political order, structures of trade and debt, of investment and technology, of communications and decision-making. What is occurring in Africa is what Paul VI warned against in 1967 in *Populorum progressio* when he spoke of 'neo-colonialism, in the form of political pressures and economic suzerainty aimed at maintaining or acquiring complete dominance' (n 52). The 1971 Synod statement, *Justice in the world*, repeated a warning about 'a real danger that the conditions of life created especially by colonial domination may evolve into a new form of colonialism in which the developing nations will be victims of the interplay of international economic forces' (n 16).

For example, Africa exports raw materials (e.g. minerals, timber, cotton, coffee, cocoa, tea) and imports petrol and finished goods (e.g. machinery, medicines, technologies). Since the prices of exports have declined and the prices of imports increased, most African countries have fallen into the classic 'balance of trade deficit' that cripples developing economies around the world. Neither set of prices come under the control of the African countries themselves but are dictated by the industrialized countries. Moreover, Africa's share in world trade has continued to fall dramatically in recent years. As a result of the Uruguay Round of agreements on world trade liberalization, this share is expected to fall even more in the years ahead.

### *Topics that challenge*

What does 'life on the margin' mean for many Africans today? Without any pretence of providing a comprehensive, in-depth review, let me briefly take five topics that are important for understanding the contemporary context. What may be helpful especially for non-African readers, subject as they usually are to little or no *African* perspectives in discussing such topics (the American or European media are generally neither accurate nor fair), is to highlight the influences in these areas that come from outside of Africa.

*Human rights.* The independence struggle of the mid-twentieth century was fought by Africans largely on ideological grounds of recognizing the rightful dignity of humans who had been degraded by colonial oppression. Yet the basic regimes of human rights as articulated in the United Nations Universal Charter of Human Rights and the

Organization of African Unity's Charter of Human and People's Rights have not in fact been widely accepted and implemented on the continent. Free expression, participation in decision-making, respect for individual and community dignity, meeting of basic economic needs, regard for cultural traditions: while these and other rights have been vigorously struggled for by Africans, effective enjoyment of them still lies outside the grasp of most of the population on the continent.

Take, for instance, democratic processes. I consider 'democracy' in general terms of people's participation and I do not narrow the focus only to specifically western models. Although a prominent goal of the independence fight had been free rule by local people, by the end of the 1980s, twenty-eight of the thirty-four sub-Saharan states were oppressively governed by military dictatorships, one-party regimes, or 'presidents-for-life'. Most of these regimes were corrupt, self-serving, inefficient, and cruel. But it is particularly sad to note that many had very good friends outside Africa that supported their rule because of strategic or economic geo-political interests. An example is the Zairean dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, ally of conservative politicians in the United States. Another example is the situation that has prevailed in the Horn of Africa, where East-West interests have played a key role in the power struggles of dictators.

*Famine.* No picture out of Africa is more heart-rending than that of a starving child with distended belly and sunken eyes. Conditions of hunger and malnutrition are appalling to human sensitivities, and challenging to a faith that prays, 'give us this day our daily bread'. About 170 million people – a third of the sub-region's population – do not have enough to eat; about 23 million children are malnourished and 16 per cent of babies are underweight.<sup>5</sup>

Lack of food for people in Africa is caused by lack of purchasing power by households and governments, by structural inequities and land tenure and marketing monopolies, by economic policies such as inherited colonial models that ignore 'food first' agricultural development, and by repeated natural catastrophes such as drought and pestilence. But the tragedy of famine in Africa, as shown forcefully in the debates around the 1996 Rome Food Summit, is that it is also linked closely to economic and political policies of the industrialized nations (e.g. agricultural subsidies, trade patterns, etc.).

*Debt.* In many African countries, external debt is the cross upon which the poor are daily crucified. Such language may seem strong, but it is completely realistic when it is noted that more money is spent on debt servicing than on education and health care, and that Structural

Adjustment Programmes (SAP) designed to generate foreign exchange for debt repayment are also generating job retrenchments, increased prices for basics, and curtailment of social services.

Total external debt for sub-Saharan Africa was US\$84 billion in 1980; this more than doubled to US\$190 billion by 1990; and by 1996 this stood at US\$223 billion. The major portion of the new debt is not a transfer of funds from donors for development projects to improve the lives of people, but 'balance of payment' transfers for remittances back on previous debt. Given this unbearable situation, it is clear why at the African Synod the African bishops addressed their brother bishops in Europe and North America to raise the cry: 'Forgive us our debts!'<sup>6</sup>

*Tribalism and ethnic conflicts.* Africa features most notably in the news in western countries at times of disaster. Somalia and Ethiopia, Sudan and Liberia, Rwanda and Burundi, Angola and Mozambique: these names are known today to many people outside Africa primarily because of the tragic wars that have ravaged their lands. While it is true that tribal and ethnic considerations play roles in these conflicts, it is also important to recognize that 'ethnic expression remains mostly instrumental and situational, rather than primordial, and responds to interest based strategies'.<sup>7</sup> That is, political power and economic benefit are the more serious driving forces behind so-called 'ethnic clashes'.

A second point to be noted about the conflictual tragedies tearing up Africa today is how they have been influenced by the historical manipulations of powers outside Africa and how they continue to be fuelled by the arms trade. Wars in Ethiopia and Somalia reflected the status of these nations as pawns in the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States; these same 'super-powers' played their bloody games through surrogates in Angola. French interest in maintaining its influence in the Great Lakes Region has had consequences for prospects for peace in Rwanda. And throughout the continent, ordinary warfare has been enhanced in its bloody consequences by the profit-driven trade in arms (practised by, among others, the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia, Israel). As John Paul II states in *Ecclesia in Africa*, 'Those who foment wars in Africa by the arms trade are accomplices in abominable crimes against humanity' (n 118).

*AIDS.* Africa today has the highest rate of HIV-infected persons. Approximately two-thirds of the 16 million estimated by the World Health Organization to be infected worldwide live on the continent. The spread of HIV and AIDS throughout Africa is both an effect and a cause of poverty. It is poverty-related in that education to forestall its

spread and medical responses to its consequences are both inadequately funded. Moreover, many poor women solicit sex in order to secure funds for feeding their children or meeting school fees. It is poverty-creating in that the hardest hit group, people between the ages of 18 and 45, are the most productive. Recent studies are showing a slowing and/or decline in the growth of gross national product (GNP) in many countries because of HIV and AIDS<sup>8</sup> (see the 1996 Human Development Report). This comes about because of many factors, including the loss of trained professionals, disruption of work patterns because of funerals, and decline in agricultural production due to requirements that women take care of the sick in their homes.

Dealing with AIDS in Africa is a complex problem because of cultural issues (e.g. customs restricting sex education), status and roles of women, increasing pressures on extended families (e.g. caring for children orphaned by AIDS), and the role of traditional healers and medicine. It can be said without too much fear of contradiction that even if all the other social, economic and political challenges facing Africa today could be met, if the spread of HIV and AIDS is not contained in an effective and humane way, the continent will not achieve integral development in the foreseeable future.<sup>9</sup>

### *Joys and hopes*

The Pastoral Constitution on the *Church in the modern world* spoke of the 'sorrows and anxieties' of the women and men of this age, especially the poor and those in any way afflicted. But it also spoke of their 'joys and hopes' (n 1). So we must do the same, especially if we are to ask about the effect on African spirituality of this global profile of a continent on the margin.

A meeting on 'The Social Thought and Action of the Church in English and Portuguese Speaking Africa', sponsored in 1996 by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, addressed this issue of the 'joys and hopes' on the African continent today. In its Final Declaration<sup>10</sup> the participants said:

Even amidst problems, we recognize great hopes among our people, that give promises for a better future. These include:

- experience in the African Synod of a truly African church, inculturated and dynamic
- increase of interest in and commitment to justice and peace as part of the Gospel mission
- growth of the Small Christian Communities
- hard work of the people, especially women and peasant farmers

- efforts of democratization, at great sacrifice, and the miracles of South Africa's transition.

Any spirituality that will sustain the Christians of Africa today, in the face of the immense 'sorrows and anxieties' ravaging the continent, must take account also of these and many other 'joys and hopes'.

For me, one of the most encouraging signs of hope is the vigour and vitality of African women who face the day-to-day realities of life at the margin. I do not consider it out of place to suggest that if Jesus were to tell the story today of the Good Samaritan, cited by John Paul II as Africa's contemporary parable, that Good Samaritan would be a woman. She would be the African woman who struggles to raise a family in dignity in the midst of degrading poverty, who moves into business or political life with a vision of humanizing the situations, who serves the Church with dedication and intelligence, and who strives to overcome the prejudices and patronizing of a culture and a Church that do not always fully recognize her dignity.<sup>11</sup>

### *Implications for spirituality*

In conclusion, of the many implications for African spirituality that might arise from this analysis of the continental context, let me briefly mention four characteristics that deserve much more detailed development.<sup>12</sup>

First, in the face of profound problems and immense sufferings, there is need for a spirituality of the Paschal Mystery. It was surely more than a felicitous coincidence that the 1994 African Synod was held during the Easter Season. In *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II reiterates an expression voiced by many of the bishops: 'This was indeed a Synod of Hope and Resurrection . . .' (n 13).

A frightening phenomenon is occurring within many circles both inside and outside Africa, the growth of a deep despair of any possibility of improvement in the future. This so-called 'Afro-pessimism' needs to be countered with a spirituality marked first by an Ignatian discernment that recognizes the 'evil spirit' of debilitating desolation, and then by an evangelical commitment to realistic hope and practical perseverance.

According to John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Africa*,

Despite the mainly negative picture which today characterizes numerous parts of Africa, and despite the sad situations being experienced in many countries, the Church has the duty to affirm vigorously that these difficulties can be overcome. She must strengthen in all



Africans hope of genuine liberation. In the final analysis, this confidence is based on the Church's awareness of God's promise, which assures us that history is not closed in upon itself but is open to God's Kingdom. This is why there is no justification for despair or pessimism when we think about the future of both Africa and any other part of the world. (n 14; see also n 143)

Second, in the face of a depersonalization caused by colonial dominance and alienation from cultural heritage (referred to by some African writers as 'anthropological poverty'), there is need for a spirituality that affirms the African person and proclaims that Jesus, Word of God, can be incarnated as an African person. This is the core of the challenge of *inculturation* which was the major theme of the African Synod and is the central challenge for the Church to meet if it is to survive on the African continent. Inculturation is about *making the faith genuinely Christian and authentically African*. It is to be expected, then, that spirituality in Africa takes on specifically African traits, both in theological content (e.g. the role of the Holy Spirit, the place of the ancestors) and in expression (e.g. forms of prayer and liturgy).

Third, in the face of conflictual situations rooted in diverse loyalties and manipulated by political selfishness, there is need for a spirituality of communion and community, of solidarity and selflessness.<sup>13</sup> There is need to live a universalism that can overcome the often artificial divisions arising from tribal, ethnic and national identifications. Inter-cultural dialogue, active non-violence, patient reconciliation: all of these aspects of Christian life must be fostered as part of a mature spirituality.

Fourth, in the face of foreign influences of materialistic and consumerist values, and of political and economic modes of dominance, there is a need for a spirituality that affirms the traditional African value of *respect for life*. Such a respect will build authentically and integrally a commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. There will be no division between the promotion of spirituality and the work for structural transformation of the world. The cultural values that underlie unjust and oppressive social structures – values that at root are not genuinely African – need to be challenged by this spirituality.

What might result from the development of a spirituality marked by these four characteristics is hinted at, I believe, in a particularly prophetic remark made by John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Africa*. While acknowledging that the continent is rich in natural resources but economically poor, the pope notes that Africa 'is endowed with a

wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which it can offer to the Churches and to humanity as a whole' (n 42).

Here, indeed, is the reason why 'a continent on the margins' must not be ignored by the rest of the world. Africa has too much to offer the rest of the world. To return to the parable that opened my reflections, I would say that the priest and levite might pass the wounded continent by, but surely at their own spiritual peril.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The full text is found in *The Church in Africa: post-Synodal apostolic exhortation 'Ecclesia in Africa' of the Holy Father John Paul II* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1995). An abbreviated version is found in *The African Synod comes home: a simplified text*, edited by AMECEA Pastoral Department (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995). The latter publication is a noteworthy example of taking a complicated and disorganized papal text and faithfully rendering it into an ordered and easy-to-read version.

<sup>2</sup> This list is taken from *The African Synod comes home*, p 12.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent comprehensive overview, see John Prendergast, *Crisis and hope in Africa* (Washington DC: Center of Concern, 1996). An analytical look with implications for the Church's pastoral response can be found in Peter J. Henriot SJ, 'The social context of the AMECEA countries on the eve of the African Synod', *AFER (African Ecclesial Review)* vol 34, no 6 (December 1992), pp 340–363. For a description of the social analysis approach, see Joe Holland and Peter Henriot SJ, *Social analysis: linking faith and justice* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, and Washington DC: Center of Concern, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See John Baur, *2000 years of Christianity in Africa: an African history 62–1992* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), pp 95–97.

<sup>5</sup> See *Africa Recovery* vol 10, no 2 (October 1996), p 25.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Forgive us our debts: open letter to our brother bishops in Europe and North America', signed by 37 bishops, Rome 1994; printed in *The African Synod: documents, reflections, perspectives*, compiled and edited by the Africa Faith and Justice Network under the direction of Maura Browne SND (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pp 114–116.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey Glickman, 'Democratic ethnic conflict management in Africa', *Idoc Internazionale* vol 27, no 4 (October–December 1996), p 11.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human development report 1996* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> See *Ecclesia in Africa*, n 116.

<sup>10</sup> Private circulation from Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, President, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Vatican City, 14 November 1996.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ecclesia in Africa*, n 121. Unfortunately, though the members of the African Synod spoke honestly about the issue of unjust treatment of women in many church situations, the papal Apostolic Exhortation is silent on this topic. A good overview can be found in Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, 'Women in the Churches in Africa: possibilities for presence and promise' in African Faith and Justice Network, *The African Synod*, pp 171–187.

<sup>12</sup> With gratitude, I draw inspiration for these points from a discussion by the Rwandan theologian, Theoneste Nkeramihigo SJ, in a 1996 unpublished paper, 'Preamble for an inculturated concept of Jesuit formation in Africa and Madagascar'.

<sup>13</sup> See *Ecclesia in Africa*, n 43.