

African bishops seek vision to address ‘formidable challenges’

CAPE TOWN, South Africa - The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar has asked Catholic universities in Africa to come up with ways that the church can meet the continent’s “formidable challenges,” said a member of the symposium’s standing committee.

“In Africa, most Catholic churches are involved in issues of social and economic justice, but we don’t have the requisite knowledge and expertise to make the necessary impact,” Archbishop Gabriel C. Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, said in a March 3 telephone interview following the symposium’s five-day meeting.

The meeting of the standing committee of the symposium, known as SECAM, was chaired by the symposium’s president, Tanzanian Cardinal Polycarp Pengo. It prepared for the symposium’s plenary session, which will convene in Accra July 26-Aug. 2 with the theme, “SECAM at 40: Self-Reliance and the Way Forward for the Church in Africa.”

The symposium was founded in 1969 in Kampala, Uganda.

The committee “recommended that Catholic universities in African countries study the documents” produced at the Synod of Bishops for Africa in October which focused on reconciliation, justice and peace. The committee asked the universities to “come up with a plan to help us fashion a vision and a way out of the problems we have in Africa,” Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said.

War, corruption and poverty have led to large numbers of displaced persons and refugees on the continent as well as to a “brain drain,” he said, because educated

Africans take their skills to the developed world.

The symposium's Good Governance Project, established three years ago, "has urged our heads of state to forestall these problems," he said.

Benedict Assorow, SECAM's director of communications, told Catholic News Service that in addition to the universities, "the laity will be asked to examine the synod's documents and to research ways to engage the church on the continent in the activities of SECAM."

Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said the Synod of Bishops for Africa energized SECAM to move forward in addressing the longstanding concerns. The July plenary will allow Africa's bishops to discuss "how to reposition SECAM as a greater stakeholder on the continent," he said.

"We will look at what the church in Africa is aspiring to do. There is a lot to be done," he said.

African Catholic schools and universities "need to establish faculties of social justice and strengthen those that exist so that they can inform minds and form consciences," the archbishop explained, noting that "often, when people are in power, they forget that power is about the capacity to serve."

If politicians "have been educated in social justice at an early stage, they won't need as much mentoring when they are in power," said Archbishop Palmer-Buckle, who heads the justice and peace department of Ghanaian bishops' conference.

The Good Governance Project will renew its efforts "to involve all national justice and peace commissions in Africa," he said, noting that representatives of national commissions will meet in Maputo, Mozambique, March 23-26 to draft an action plan.

SECAM's standing committee has asked the symposium's nine regions to prepare reports on their work and the challenges they face for the plenary, the archbishop said.

At the plenary, "we will look at what we have done in the 40 years of our existence and plot a way forward," Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said, adding that the symposium needs "a new sense of relevance."

More than 150 bishops from African countries, as well as delegates from Europe, the United States, Asia and major church funding agencies are expected to attend the plenary session.