

Curtain's up on Africa: Scripted synod - but maybe some improv

VATICAN CITY - A Synod of Bishops is a little like a short-run Broadway play, and after four years of preparation the curtain is about to go up on the African synod at the Vatican.

The form will be familiar to the more than 200 bishops and others who participate in the Oct. 4-25 assembly: a week or so of individual speeches followed by small-group discussions, all aimed at drafting a final list of proposals and a message to the world.

But when it comes to the content of this synod, the script has not been written. The list of potential topics extends from ethnic conflict to environmental protection, and the variety of African cultures and experiences pretty much guarantees a wide-ranging assembly.

The synod's official theme is "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace," and participants will no doubt hear reports on the continent's many simmering conflicts and the millions displaced by war and strife. In this sense, the synod will spotlight the "forgotten wars" that slid off the media radar long ago, but that cause daily suffering and distress.

The working document for the synod called on the church to be a mediator among parties in conflict. But as Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized, the church cannot be a healing and reconciling force in society unless it is a "community of persons reconciled with God and among themselves."

Beneath the many social and political topics, there is a strong theological vein to this synod, reflected in the thematic subtitle: "You are the salt of the earth. ... You are

the light of the world.” The image of salt expresses the transforming power of Christ’s disciples, while light represents their ability to shine the light of the Gospel on people and society.

Speaking in Cameroon last spring, the pope said the church’s essential role in Africa was to present Jesus Christ as the one redeemer, and thus “enhance African traditions” and “correct and perfect their concept of life, humanity and the family.”

Pope Benedict will preside over the daily sessions of speechgiving, and in past assemblies he has been an attentive observer. He has introduced a less-formal discussion period in evening sessions and typically summarizes the most important points in impromptu comments at the end of the day.

The synod’s working document touches on an issue that was hammered hard by the pope during his first visit to Africa in March: that Africa risks the imposition of “cultural models” that would lead the continent down the path of materialism and relativism and away from its traditional values.

The working document also warns of “a process organized to destroy the African identity” and said globalization tends to be “the vehicle for the domination of a single cultural model and a culture of death.”

This concern was echoed by the pope in Africa, when he asked the continent to be wary of a “tyranny of materialism” and told Africans: “Take care of your souls. Do not let yourselves be captivated by selfish illusions and false ideals.”

Many other issues, pastoral and theological, are expected to make their appearance on the synod stage. They include:

- Inculturation of the Gospel, or finding ways to ground the faith in local cultures. A perennial issue, this synod may continue the discussion that began at the first

African synod in 1994. That assembly recommended some flexibility by local churches in changing parts of liturgical celebrations, as long as essential elements were not altered. It also suggested that some form of ancestor veneration be permitted with proper liturgies.

- The family. Many church leaders see the family as under attack, and the synod will no doubt hear criticism of development programs that promote contraception and abortion. But the working document also called for some self-examination, urging the church to come up with a more creative response to the spiritual and moral needs of couples and families.

- Dialogue with Muslims. In the run-up to the synod, bishops said the tendency to politicize religious affiliation was a growing problem in Africa, particularly in regard to Islam. As with practically everything in Africa, Catholic-Muslim relations are a mixed picture: great cooperation in some areas, tension and intolerance in others.

- Strengthening lay Catholics' role in society. The synod preparatory council has called for greater impact by African laity in areas of politics, the armed forces, the economy, education, health, the media and the general culture. The synod will no doubt also hear strategies for improving religious education among the faithful and making better use of the continent's 400,000 catechists.

- Economic justice. The effects of globalization and the current economic crisis will be very much on the minds of synod participants, and some will remind the international community not to forget their commitments to Africa. At the same time, the synod's working document has made the case for greater economic self-sufficiency by local church communities in Africa, cautioning against dependency on outside assistance.

The roster of synod participants is predominantly African, and Pope Benedict

recently added his own appointees: 36 bishop and priest members from around the world, including Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of Atlanta; and 78 experts and auditors, 30 of whom are women. Only the synod members, most of whom are bishops, will vote in the assembly.

Synods tend to spotlight veterans and new faces among bishops, and the African synod is no exception. While the pope is the official president of the synod, the task of running the daily sessions will be shared by three delegated co-presidents: Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, retired prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments; Cardinal Theodore-Adrien Sarr of Dakar, Senegal; and South African Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of Durban.

Much interest will be focused on 61-year-old Cardinal Peter Turkson of Cape Coast, Ghana, Africa's youngest cardinal and the synod's recording secretary. He prepares two major papers, one introducing the themes for discussion at the synod's start and one summarizing all the speeches made to the assembly before the bishops gather in small groups to draw up proposals for the pope. It's a tough job and a somewhat thankless one.

With the heavy emphasis on speeches, most synods are talkathons, and the final output is words: a list of proposals that are eventually woven into a papal document. But the three weeks also offer less-formal opportunities to share experiences and insights, at meals and during breaks in the sessions. The synod's opening and closing Masses will include African elements and reflect the Vatican's idea of the proper balance between inculturation and the Roman rite.