

Homily Reflections - African Bishops' Mass

The presence of so many African bishops this morning evokes the memory of the days eleven years ago when the first Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa was held in Rome. We began on a sad note, even as the Gospel today begins on a sad note, the word that Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary and the friend of Jesus, is ill.

The unfolding of the Gospel story is one that gives us hope, as we learn of the death of Lazarus and the interpretation Jesus gives of it: "Our friend has fallen asleep, but I am going to awake him." Jesus called Lazarus back to life, and we are reminded that our Lenten prayers, penances and almsgiving all aim at helping us to move towards an Easter of joyful life in the Risen Lord.

The Synod for Africa began as the sad news poured in from Rwanda, with many of the bishops there slaughtered in the uprising with their people.

That sad news had its echo in the Synod Hall, as people from all over Africa reflected on the challenges to the people of that continent: wars, famine, disease (malaria and HIV/AIDS), political turmoil and instability. But as our discussions continued we came to realize, especially in the small group discussions, that the Church, the Catholic Church, was the greatest force for good in the region. It was the Church which provided the schools which were educating children, boys and girls, teaching them the skills and the virtues for living and governance. The Church ran the dispensaries and hospitals which treated the ill in the name of Jesus.

Above all, the Church provided for the preaching of the Gospel, which called for a transformation of life and in the Sacraments, offered the means of grace needed for this transformation to be lived out.

They looked to the industrialized nations both as a source of some of the evils on the continent and as a source for help to move to a new plateau of health and vitality.

It was an education for me to learn how Africa had become a dumping ground for

both moral (pornography) and physical (chemical by-products of manufacturing) refuse from the Northern Hemisphere.

It was also illuminating to hear some of the effects of the external debt situation plaguing some countries, and of the governmental corruption which must be ended before debt problems could be eased effectively. In addition, the need for dialogue with other Christian Churches, and with other religions, including the native animists and the rapidly growing Muslims, was affirmed.

To my new friends from Africa I explained how the Church is one voice among many in our country and how, in a democracy, we seek to make our voice heard in the public policy debate. It is a grace for us that these bishops come to articulate to our Catholic Relief Services and to policy makers of our nation the urgent need for assistance from the United States to African nations in their struggle against famine, disease and corruption.

Today, as we reflect in this Eucharist on the hope Jesus offers us in the Gospel passage and in the Mass itself, as he makes present his saving action, we pray that the Lord may touch hearts and minds in the United States and in Africa with renewed and deepened faith and hope.