

Nigerian archbishop calls for new structure

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – Africa's Catholic bishops need a structure to enable them to speak and act as one unit, said Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar.

"The time is ripe for this, not only because of the many challenges Africa faces, but because the church has the resources to be able to tackle these problems," he said in a Jan. 17 telephone interview from Dares Salaam, Tanzania, where the symposium met Jan. 15-22.

"It is not enough to have bishops good at managing their own dioceses; we need to find viable ways of talking as one and helping one another," he said, noting that the Catholic Church in Africa is one of the "best organized groups, with good and effective leaders."

Over the past 40 years the symposium has provided a forum for member bishops' conferences to exchange ideas and experiences, "and now we need to bring in another dimension" through examining what role is appropriate at a continental level, Archbishop Onaiyekan said. When the symposium has the structures to "speak as one unit, we will also be able to go to the aid of any African country in dire need of assistance," he said.

Restructuring SECAM along the lines of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community will enable it to "develop relationships with similar bodies," Archbishop Onaiyekan said. It could also work effectively with parallel political groupings, particularly the African Union, as well as "build on our experience in talking with agencies that work in Africa, such as UNICEF," he said.

Violent conflicts in Africa are a cause of great concern to the symposium, Archbishop Onaiyekan said, noting that poverty on the continent will not be overcome without peace. Africa suffers largely from "self-inflicted wounds," he said, noting that many

of its “countries are rich while people are poor.” Corruption among the ruling elite is a primary reason for this disparity, he said.

The “international dimension” to Africa’s poverty will be discussed at the plenary meeting, Archbishop Onaiyekan said, noting that in his Jan. 16 address to the assembly, Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete urged church leaders to “help African governments’ efforts to get better trade deals” with countries on other continents.

“We need an equitable international trade system” that is not “heavily loaded against Africa, as is the case now,” the archbishop said.

At the Jan. 16 opening of the evangelization congress that forms part of SECAM’s plenary meeting, Archbishop Onaiyekan said the congress should serve as a continental preparation for the next African synod, with particular emphasis on issues of justice, peace and good governance.

“The realities around us unfortunately give little cause for optimism in these matters,” he said. “We need to identify the challenges for the church and face them squarely in the light of the Gospel,” he said, noting that the role of the lay faithful “as light of the world, salt of the earth and leaven in the sociopolitical arena of our continent remains crucial, guided by the social teachings of the church and strengthened by the prayers of the whole church of God.”

The first special synod for Africa was held at the Vatican in 1994. A date for the next synod has not been set, but Pope John Paul II announced in 2004 his intention to convoke a second synod, citing new challenges and new growth in the African church. Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the decision.