

President Obama being cited at African synod

VATICAN CITY – U.S. President Barack Obama was mentioned three times by two different bishops on the first full day of the special Synod of Bishops for Africa.

And the laudatory citations continued, even when African bishops were told that some U.S. bishops have problems with Obama's stances on abortion and other life issues.

Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of Kinshasa, Congo, told the synod Oct. 5 that Obama's election was of historic importance and could signal a major step forward in peaceful relations between people of different ethnic groups and between the North and the South of the world.

The archbishop's task at the synod was to report on developments – positive and negative – since the first Synod of Bishops for Africa was held in 1994.

Looking at the theme of reconciliation, Archbishop Monsengwo Pasinya suggested that the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers, who had sold him into slavery, could be a key for reading the last 500 years of African history, particularly the slave trade.

“Joseph interprets his departure for Egypt as though it were the will of God who sent him ahead of the others (his brothers) to save their lives for a greater deliverance,” the archbishop said.

He suggested that people could see the Africans brought to America against their will as the first contributors to building a nation of people who would learn to accept one another and work together.

If people recognize that “the election of a black as head of the United States of America was a ‘divine sign’ and a sign from the Holy Spirit for the reconciliation of races and ethnic groups for peaceful human relations,” he said, the synod and the church “would gain from not ignoring this important event in contemporary history,

which is far from a trivial game of political alliances.”

Obama also was mentioned twice by Cardinal Peter Turkson of Cape Coast, Ghana, the recording secretary of the synod.

The cardinal was asked at the opening day press conference if he had been surprised by Obama’s election.

He replied that it was a surprise on some levels, but it was not unthinkable since the United States presents itself as a beacon of equality and freedom around the world.

But even before he was asked about Obama, Cardinal Turkson slipped Obama’s name into the synod hall – and into its official record.

As recording secretary, the cardinal was charged with introducing the themes to be tackled by the synod. His presentation – 13 single-spaced pages long – included a footnote citing Obama’s July speech to the Parliament of Ghana.

The cardinal told the synod, “In a sense, Africa’s emergence from its economic throes should be the work of Africans and be spearheaded by them.”

In the footnote, he wrote that Obama made the same point in his speech to Parliament.

At a press conference Oct. 7, Archbishop Charles G. Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, said that African Christians, who believe that God truly directs history, think the election of Obama should not be seen only “as fortuitous. ... There must be a plan behind it.”

African Catholics, he said, continue to pray that Obama’s presidency “will bring blessings with it for Africa and for the whole world.”

Archbishop Simon Ntamwana of Gitega, Burundi, said that even amid war and conflict Christians are called to be people of hope and, after years of racism in the United States, Obama’s election gives them hope.

“Yesterday it was not so easy to believe that a black American could be president of the United States and we think that that special blessing of the Lord is really also

promised to our situation, which is so complicated” by ethnic tensions, the Burundian archbishop said.

Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, said Obama’s presidency has important lessons for Africans that include relations between ethnic groups.

He said that in Kenya, where Obama’s father was born, many people think it would be impossible for a member of the elder Obama’s Luo ethnic group to be elected president; yet his son can lead the United States.

In addition, Archbishop Onaiyekan said of the U.S. president who is the son of an African: “I believe that Obama - more than anybody else, and certainly more than any white man -has the authority to talk straight to our bad leaders and tell them they are messing up our continent.”

Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said the African bishops “are definitely aware” that some U.S. bishops have criticized Obama, but the fact is that Obama is not a Catholic obliged to follow church teaching.

The U.S. bishops have a right to express their criticisms and concerns and work for acceptance of their positions, but the church also “has a responsibility to meet him, to see what are the things that unite us rather than the things that divide us,” he said.

“One thing he (Obama) said that impressed me when he went to the University of Notre Dame was that we are all looking at how to make the world a better place for the millions of people we want to serve, so why don’t we sit, why don’t we talk, why don’t we put our cards on the table and discuss,” Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said.

Archbishop Onaiyekan said the bishops were not speaking “in glowing terms” about Obama, but simply expressing their happiness that a man who is half-American, half-Kenyan was elected president.

“In Africa we are just happy when our brother is big,” he said.