

“The concept of ‘Justice’ in the second synod for Africa”

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Three basic concepts were of concern to the Church in the second synod for Africa: reconciliation, justice and peace. These are the concepts that define the challenges of evangelization faced by the Church in Africa today. The articulation of these three concepts may not have been systematic in the preparatory documents; each of them was, however, the object of particular attention. Following the path traced by *Instrumentum laboris*, the *Relatio ante-disceptationem* took in hand and developed further the concept of justice in its biblical dimension. A retrospective study shows that the Synod drew upon a dual conceptualization of justice: the traditional meaning inherited from the Roman tradition, attributed among others to Cicero² – “*suum cuique tribuere*” (distributive justice), and the Biblical meaning, where justice is understood as an adherence to the terms of the Covenant, which leads to an understanding of justice as justification.

Distributive justice: “To each his due”

In *Instrumentum laboris*, which is essentially a summary of answers coming from different ecclesial communities, the notion of justice is understood in its common meaning: “render to every man his due.” In this document, we find that Joseph “offered to Mary, his wife and to the child in her womb, what was their due: the protection of life.”² One sees here an extension of the notion of justice that needs to be articulated. This interpretation of the traditional maxim must be explained however on the basis of African social realities marked by flagrant injustices. Indeed, if the gap between the rich and the poor is deplored all over the world, the African context pricks our conscience even more. In fact non-African companies or the African oligarchies are the ones who, at the expense of the African people, make unscrupulous and enormous profits from mining and exporting the immense resources that are found on African soil. There is therefore a serious problem of “distribution” of wealth, which guarantees that each and every person has the minimum required in order to lead a dignified life. It is true that in the light of the discussions triggered by such an understanding of justice, this “minimum” raises the difficulty³ of who should take care of this distribution.

In the speeches and documents of the Synod Fathers, governments, as well as the political and economic actors, are held accountable for the unequal

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²Synod for Africa, *Instrumentum laboris*, n.44.

³See Mathieu Ndomba, « De l’injustice comme violence à la justice comme contenu de l’éthique de la paix », *Akwaba* 2 (2009) 55-63.

distribution of goods. Indeed, it is stated in the *Nuntius*: “Whatever the level of liability attributable to foreign interests, we cannot deny a shameful and tragic complicity of local leaders: politicians who betray their nations and put them up for auction, shameless businessmen who gang up with greedy multinationals, African arms dealers and sellers speculating on those small firearms which destroy human lives, and local staff members of international organizations getting paid to spread harmful ideologies with which they themselves disagree.”⁴ This accusatory tone is based on the idea of distributive justice. The Synod does justice by casting a positive light on the efforts of some African leaders to uproot this exploitation. Those who make an effort deserve proper recognition for what they do at the political level and at the level of the economy.⁵ In fact, the Mécanisme Africain d'Évaluation par les Pairs (MAEP), which assesses itself on its administration of economic and political affairs, receives great attention from the Synod.

In interpreting this phenomenon of globalization, the Synod applies the concept of distributive justice. It notes a situation of injustice vis-à-vis Africa, scorned and rejected, not only when it comes to its ability to function autonomously, but also, and more importantly, in its culture and religious soul. Even if Africa is the “spiritual lung of today’s world today”, this Continent “runs the risk of being infected by the double virus of materialism and religious fanaticism.”⁶ In fact, sellers of “magic” solutions of development manipulate the young, thanks to the media, and induce in them the belief that materialistic culture is a sign and proof of development. In such a context, who is to give present and future generations of Africa their due?

These considerations show the need, indeed the necessity, of an operative concept of justice in a horizontal sense. At the same time, such a vision of justice would be inadequate, not in its tangible results, but in attaining the profundity of an authentic justice. As a result, the Synod Fathers underline the importance of adopting as a starting point the Sacred Scriptures so as to take into consideration the transcendent dimension of the concept of justice.

Justice-justification in the context of the Covenant

By referring to the Old Testament, as well as to the New one, the term “justice” is revised to indicate no longer “objects” (physical) to be given, but relations to be restored. This approach vis-à-vis justice, in which the Biblical Covenant becomes the reference point, is developed in *Relatio ante-disceptationem* which rejects “certain secularized forms of the concept of justice,” namely, “the mere’ survival of the fittest,” “a social compromise that avoids greater evils,” “and the benefits of impartiality in the general

⁴Synod for Africa, *Nuntius*, n. 36.

⁵See Synod for Africa, *Instrumentum Laboris*, n. 8; *Nuntius* n. 34.

⁶Synod for Africa, *Nuntius* n. 38.

application of a singular law, without regard for natural justice.”⁷ It then notes that the “rise of the ‘spirit of capitalism’ has contributed to alienating the concept of justice from all transcendent roots. For example, the morality of the economy became based on the rational and individualistic. Its main interest was profit, completely separated from the demands of solidarity, of an ‘*ordo amoris*’ and from all religious and moral ties. The whole notion of social justice was thus eliminated, and ‘justice’ was only applied according to the conventions of contracts, negotiated under the law of supply and demand without any restriction on the individualistic enterprise. The State simply maintained public order and contract commitments, but remained totally neutral as to their content.”⁸

To correct this view, the Synod returns to the Word of God. It points out that the history of the story of salvation in the Old Testament has shown the inability of the sons of Israel to rise up to the standards required of them by the Covenant. They were consistently unfaithful to their partner: the Lord God. The latter, however, expressed his loyalty by coming to the aid of his people in their weakness. In spite of everything, He restored their dignity. In other words, He justified his people. As a result, the justice which the Synod echoes is that of the Scriptures, where justice is seen as a gift from God, who thus reveals Himself in an outstanding manner and grants the grace of salvation to those who are without merit.

When “justice” becomes “justification”, the human person is no longer seen as being able to adjust himself to God and others all by himself. The force required must come to him from elsewhere i.e. from God⁹ “for it is He who makes the sinner capable of entering into a relationship of communication and covenant with Him, and enables him to do justice.”¹⁰ Once mankind is justified, men and women benefit from the grace that allows them, in turn, to do justice. It appears that the transcendent dimension of justice has its own internal logic, where the person admitted back into the relationship of covenant with God will also become a restorer of relationships and just structures with others.

Justice will become meaningful when it re-establishes the original relationships of a covenant in which all Africans would live as sons and daughters of the same family. It is this kind of justice, greater than that of human beings, that the Church, as the Family of God, feels duty-bound to promote. This concept of justice finds its culmination in reconciliation, of which peace is a sign. It is rooted in the relationship with God and is revealed in the relationship that human beings have amongst themselves.

⁷*Ibidem.*

⁸*Ibidem.*

⁹Synod for Africa, Proposition 14.

From distributive justice to justice justification

This extremely rapid study of mine shows that two concepts of justice are at work in the documents of the Synod. The question we must face is the following: "How can distributive justice link up with that of the Covenant?" According to the Synod, "the justice of the Christian *Diakonia* is the right order of things and the satisfaction of legitimate demands within relationships. It is the justice and righteousness of God and of His kingdom (cf. *Mt* 6:33)."¹⁰ Implicitly, then, one can say that to give everyone his due according to the paradigm of distribution, justice has to be broadened by being inscribed "within a wider framework of relationships [that] can account for aspects of what is owed to a person or to a group of people and (which) would not correspond to the structure of distribution."¹¹

Meeting the requirements of a relationship seems to me to be a point to emphasize when dealing with the concept of justice, even in its transcendent dimension. One reads for example that a life of communion between humanity and God assumes a character of justice: "humanity giving God his proper due." In Scripture, humanity gives God his just due when man 'listens to the voice of God', 'believes in Him', 'fears Him' and 'worships Him'. Where this is lacking, humanity must show itself "repentant" (*Acts* 17, 30).¹² This spiritual dimension of justice becomes the means by which the Synod foresees the formation of the promoter of justice: helping him to adjust to God and, in doing so, enabling him to adjust to others for "the sheer force of the human person is not enough for justice to take place. It is a gift from God. ... This God who justifies through Christ."

Conclusion

This brief overview of the concept of 'justice' in the documents of the second Synod of Bishops for Africa has shown that, actually, two concepts are at stake: the traditional concept of justice on the one hand, and the Biblical concept on the other hand. The articulation of the two was an effort visibly present in the *Relatio ante-disceptationem*, The theme of the Synod in all probability explains the direction taken i.e. how practical matters were questioning the conscience of evangelizers. Behind the positions taken, one can detect the dominant concept of justice, which remains that of "giving every man his due." However, the insistence on the transcendent dimension makes that the very condition of distributive justice being possible as well as effective. As I have already noted, its insertion into the sphere of relations

¹⁰Card. Turkson, *Relatio ante-disceptationem*.

¹¹M. Ndomba, « De l'injustice », 60.

¹²Card. Turkson, *Relatio ante-disceptationem*.

broadens even the paradigm of distribution to include non-distributable realities.

Finally, I would like to point out that for pastors dealing with situations as critical as those found in Africa, it is not surprising that the conceptual basis of justice has not been sufficiently developed for it to be operational in the analysis of pastoral situations. When we say that "God justifies the sinner by grace, and man does justice to his offender by forgiving him his sins,"¹³ the role of the mediations necessary in the human order of things is still not clarified. Indeed, how can forgiveness between humans beings be considered as a constituent element of that justice which is modeled after God's justice?¹⁴

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¹³Synod for Africa, Proposition 14.

¹⁴Much work has still to be done, from the philosophical as well as from the theological point of view, in order to render "Justice" operational by conceptualizing it.