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Missionary Prayer Intention - The Pope's missionary prayer intention for January 2007: "That the Church in Africa may bear ever more authentic witness to the Good News of Christ and promote reconciliation and peace in every country". Comment by Fr Vito Del Prete, P.I.M.E. Pontifical Missionary Union General Secretary

Vatican City (Fides Service) - In the opening address at the Special Synod of Bishops for Africa held in Rome 1994, Cardinal Arinze declared: "The Hour has Come;" the hour in which Jesus Christ calls Africa; the hour in which those present must listen to the Lord's call "to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches".
With these words the Cardinal intended to give tone and impulse to the meeting of the Bishops of Africa, a continent on which all the evils, contradictions and tragedies of our epoch appear to be concentrated. The Church in Africa has been likened to the bride tanned by the sun in the Canticle of Canticles where it is said: I am black, but beautiful. "The black bride of the Canticle of Canticles cries for joy but also out of anguish when she loses her spouse. In recent years the happy face of the African bride seems to have changed into the sad face of the black mother who mourns her countless children, victims of injustice, abuse, oppression, killed by hunger, disease and fratricidal war". (Fr. John Baur, Storia del Cristianesimo in Africa, EMI, 1998)

Humanly speaking, the situation on the African continent has reached the limit of human tragedy, almost a point of no return. There more than elsewhere, humanity has been offended and abused in the deepest and fundamental roots. Colonialism and the institution of slavery have continued to exist under a more modern and sophisticated guise.
The nations of Africa cannot find peace, it is impossible to keep up with the continual changes in geographical configuration, subject as they are to divisions, unifications, which last sometimes only a few months. There is marked political instability due mainly to hegemonic interests of western powers. But a still heavier burden are the conflicts between the many different ethnic groups which make up various African countries, the wars, conflicts started by religious extremism, and the folly of the latest dictators, who take power with force, becoming absolute lords of the territory and the people. This triggers that system of corruption so widespread as to exceed the high-water mark of normal corruption which has roots everywhere.
Africa has become poorer, Africa has become sadder.
Recently we have seen history happen. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, the Great Lakes Region, Burundi, Rwanda, Togo, Algeria, Guinea Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Congo, have become synonymous with violence, poverty, disease, hatred, war, genocide. Millions of people have been sacrificed for the interests of international economic powers and those of the warlords. They have been forced and are still forced to flee their land for political-religious reasons, and they form those immense reserves of exiles, which are no better than concentration camps. The hatred which exploded between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi was so tragic and cruel that the local radio gave instructions not on how to defend one's self from members of the other tribe, but how to kill them. The cry of Josephine Uwamahoro, a Tutsi girl who survived genocide attack in the evening of April 6, 1994 reveals the pit into which her country had fallen. After narrowly escaping death and looked after for a month by people who found her with her wounds in front of a church, Josephine whispered: "We will never come back to this church. It has become a cemetery. The angels have fled".
This massacre of the innocents continues in various parts of Africa. This is why the bride who is black but beautiful has become the more authentic image of the mother who mourns her children, torn from her amidst atrocious suffering.
Especially true and sad for Africa is what John Paul II wrote in Novo Millennio Ineunte: "Our world is entering the new millennium burdened by the contradictions of an economic, cultural and technological progress which

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offers immense possibilities to a fortunate few, while leaving millions of others not only on the margins of progress but in living conditions far below the minimum demanded by human dignity. How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic medical care? Without a roof over their heads??" (NMI, n. 50)

During the Synod for Africa the bishops identified a new image of the Church, the one most suited to African culture, deserving a central place in the life of the Church on that continent: the Church as Family, the Church Family of God in Africa. The people of God, seen as a family, confers a sense of belonging, and at the same time builds communion across the cultural and ethnic barriers, the tragic cause of so many evils. In this logic the Bishops of Africa demanded more justice in relations North South, denouncing iniquitous conditions in trade, sale of arms to Africa's warring parties, the unbearable burden of the foreign debt afflicting most African countries. This is why they adopted the model of Church-family. "The mystery of the love of the Triune God is the Church's origin, model and goal, a mystery well expressed for Africa in the image of Church as family; it highlights the concepts of caring for others, solidarity, warmth in relations, acceptance, dialogue and trust. It also indicates how authority is exercised in loving service" (prop. N. 8).

Reconciliation is a pre-condition for all other activities of evangelisation, efforts for development and desire for justice. Because, first of all it is necessary to change hearts.

The proclamation of the Gospel in Africa must be specifically an announcement for conversion to reconciliation. The goal of the plan for salvation is in fact to achieve communion among all peoples in the one family of God, the Father of all. He has made the two peoples into one, toppling the ruling edict of enmity. Here the Gospel must demonstrate its power to save, donning the cultural values of the African people. What are the cultural and Gospel elements which can foster this reconciliation? For the Gospel they are mercy - forgiveness and for African cultures dialogue.

The encounter between the Gospel and cultures is good not only for the receiving culture but also for other cultures and also for Christianity itself. It lights a fire which burns only the hatred, divisions and the inevitable self-inflicted wrongs of cultures and peoples in history. It is a fire which warms hearts of all cultures, embracing them with divine filial love and universal brotherhood.

However, to be authentic reconciliation demands the reestablishment of justice. It is here that the Church must play her important prophetic role of witness and proclamation. Evangelisation must give voice to the voiceless (prop. n. 45), side with the poor, the abused, the killed, carry the cross with them, and proclaim and live the truth. It cannot be a human, intra-worldly project. Instead it must be in keeping with the messianic mission of Christ in the power and anointing of the Spirit. Only this will prevent it from becoming demagogy and a political project. First of all the African Churches must bear witness to the Good News. Because only consistent faith which becomes witness, will be the resurrection of Africa.

"Evangelisation in Africa -Paul VI said - is not only announcing salvation, it is also continual comparison of our life, behaviour, mentality, our plans with the Charter of the Beatitudes, with the demands of love which Christ makes of his disciples. This task is long-term", and demands the necessary care to form consciences (Allocutions aux Eveques du Burundi en visite Ad Limina, en "L'Osservatore Romano", 7 April 1978, p.1).

Only in this way can the Churches in Africa be signs of reconciliation and peace. However, to build peace, we must build a culture of justice, and promote a return to genuine African values.

The Church must continue to play her prophetic role and be the voice of the voiceless". "Our epoch needs prophets and the whole Church must be prophetic. Education to work for the common good and respect for pluralism will be the most important task in our epoch". " (208) But to achieve this effectively, the Church, as a community of faith, must be an energetic witness to justice and peace in her structures and in the relationships among her members. "If the Church is to give witness to justice, she recognizes that whoever dares to speak to others about justice should also strive to be just in their eyes. It is necessary therefore to examine with care the procedures, the possessions and the life style of the Church" (Propositions 43-44; Exhortation 106).

We are asked to pray that the Churches in Africa may become effective sacraments of reconciliation and peace. Through the Church's work to promote reconciliation this land described by the African poet Abioseh Nicol "a compendium of the infinite" will emerge from its situation, no longer a developing third world continent, instead a third spiritual power between East and West, or as Blyden another African poet wrote, humanity's spiritual

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reserve”. Fr. Vito Del Prete (Agenzia Fides 4/1/2007 Righe: 109 Parole: 1547)

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