**Keynote Speech at the Opening of the Study Session of the
19th AMECEA Plenary Assembly**

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Your Eminences,
Your Graces,
Your Excellencies,
Rev. Fathers and Members of Religious Institutes,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

# Introduction

I am very pleased and indeed honoured to be able to address this Assembly. I am here in the name of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, which is responsible for directing and coordinating missionary work and cooperation. I thank you all, particularly the AMECEA leadership, for the kind invitation extended to Propaganda Fide to participate in this triennial Meeting. Allow me first to convey to you the cordial greetings of His Eminence, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, the Prefect of our Dicastery, who commissioned me to express to you our sincere appreciation for your dedicated apostolic service. The Holy See, by means of our Dicastery, is very interested in the many, varied and laudable common ventures that you have undertaken and continue to carry out for the holistic evangelization of the AMECEA region.

I have been asked and am pleased to give a keynote speech, based on the theme: “*Vibrant Diversity, Equal Dignity, Peaceful Unity in God in the AMECEA Region”*. With due consideration for time constraints, as well as the overriding concern of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, namely missionary animation, I will just highlight a few points related to the Dicastery that I represent.

# Remaining anchored in the essential mission of the Church

In order to remain anchored in the proper mission of the Church, it is important to remember, throughout our reflection and discussion, that the theme of our meeting concerns the Church’s evangelizing activity in the context of the challenges facing local Churches in the AMECEA region, in this case the challenges arising from conflicts, divisions, violence, violations of human dignity, etc. Addressing such challenges and looking for relevant solutions is, undoubtedly, an integral part of the Church’s evangelizing ministry. However, it is worth remembering that the Church should accomplish her social apostolate without straying away from her essential vocation and mission – namely, to bring the Gospel to the world and to bring people to Christ, in other words: to evangelize. As the Second Vatican Council reminded us, “Christ did not bequeath to the Church a mission in the political, economic or social order; the purpose he assigned to her was a religious one.” (*GS*, 42). The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church further clarifies the idea when it states: “This means that the Church does not intervene in technical questions with her social doctrine, nor does she propose or establish systems or models of social organization. This is not part of the mission entrusted to her by Christ”[[1]](#footnote-1).

Even though it is the responsibility of the political sphere to create a just social order, the Church – while avoiding direct involvement in political maneuvers which could compromise the identity of her mission – should stay fully committed to the promotion of human rights, justice and peace. Pope Paul VI rightly pointed out that“evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man’s concrete life, both personal and social” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 181). The mission of the Church, therefore, is meant to have an impact on the concrete life of individuals and communities, as Pope Francis rightly put it in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 180.

One of the best ways to make an impact on social life is through educating and forming mature Christians capable of effectively addressing the current challenges that our region is facing. In other words, the Church has the duty to form “upright consciences receptive to the demands of justice, so as to produce men and women willing and able to build this just social order by their responsible conduct” (*Africae Munus*, 22).

In this regard, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples highly commends the remarkable investment in education so far attained in the AMECEA region and encourages you to aim for new and higher horizons.

# Being credible and effective witnesses of unity and harmony

While other speakers will probably treat what I would call the “*ad extra* dimension” of the undertaking to promote unity, harmony and peace, I, on the other hand, would like to draw your attention to the “*ad intra* dimension” of that same mission, namely the commitment to making our local Churches more credible witnesses of unity, harmony and peace. Before engaging ourselves in social action, we have to make sure that we promote a spirituality of communion and harmony among ourselves and within the institutions of our local Churches.

The AMECEA region, like other parts of Africa, is characterized by multiple differences among its inhabitants: differences in culture and customs, in language, in ethnic and tribal affiliation, in liturgical rites, in socio-political orientation, etc. Among all these differences, however, the most felt and often contentious issue in some areas of the AMECEA region is ethnic diversity. Though sad to say, you all know very well how ethnic conflicts have divided not only our societies but also our presbyterates, our religious institutes, even our Episcopal conferences. Such conflicts have caused much suffering and even public scandal in some parts of our continent. This is why the Church in Africa feels, more than ever before, challenged by the specific responsibility of healing such divisions, starting from within the Church.

Three years ago, Pope Francis visited Africa as a Pilgrim of peace and reconciliation. I am referring to His Apostolic Journey to Kenya, Uganda and the Central African Republic. On numerous occasions He addressed various issues that threaten peace, especially the problem of tribal and ethnic conflicts. We need, therefore, to make the Holy Father’s message continue to resonate and bear fruit. Let us keep the Pope’s Visit to Africa and his concern and love for our continent alive and effective.

We have to bear witness to and make manifest the catholicity that we profess. A Church that is ethnically oriented would certainly be non-Catholic. In addressing Religious men and women during the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis said: “… In a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, […] we are called to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters”[[2]](#footnote-2). This exhortation is perfectly applicable to all Catholic faithful, especially to Bishops who have the mission of being the centre and main promoters of unity in their respective local Churches. Your efforts to seek and maintain fraternal communion will be a motivating witness to unity for the People of God and society at large.

# Vibrant diversity

Instead of being seen as an obstacle to peaceful coexistence, our diversity should be acknowledged as positive and, indeed, as something to be cherished and harnessed. In this regard, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “These differences belong to God’s plan, who wills that each receive what he needs from others, and that those endowed with particular ‘talents’ share the benefits with those who need them. These differences encourage and often oblige persons to practice generosity, kindness, and sharing of goods; they foster the mutual enrichment of cultures”(*CCC*, 1937).

In effect, if God had made all humans identical from the very beginning – alike in everything, down to the last detail, without any needs, and all with the same talents and capacities – human society would remain as a purely decorative fact, without meaning or relevance. We could even say that God ensured that there would be differences in order to ensure that humans are urged – and, in a sense, required – to contribute, each one according to his gifts and abilities, to the enrichment of the other. Therefore, “differences among persons belong to God’s plan, who wills that we should need one another” (CCC, 1946). These differences should encourage mutual complementarity.

There are, however, those differences that are not wanted by God, namely those that develop and are solidified in the context of sin and become a source of discrimination between humans. Instead of becoming sources and opportunities for enrichment, they actually damage and corrode human dignity. A true Christian cannot accept them, as they are in open contradiction to the Gospel. *Gaudium et Spes* reads: “Although rightful differences exist between men, the equal dignity of persons demands that a more humane and just condition of life be brought about. For excessive economic and social differences between the members of the one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace” (GS, n. 29).

Therefore, in the light of Christian faith, the ultimate meaning of human differences is to be found in the fact that humans can exchange their God-given gifts with one another.

# The Basic Peacebuilding Plan

Through her Magisterium, the Church has progressively laid down key principles for the architecture of peace – principles we should bear in mind in the course of our forthcoming reflections and discussions. The foundation upon which true peace must be built is the recognition and defense of the inherent and equal dignity of all members of the human family. “When the promotion of the dignity of the person is the guiding principle, ... then solid and lasting foundations for building peace are laid.”[[3]](#footnote-3) On the other hand, when human dignity is violated then the seeds of “violence are inevitably sown”[[4]](#footnote-4). Therefore, what is at the foundation of any peace-building enterprise is the “dignity of the human person, whose defense and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator, and to whom the men and women at every moment of history are strictly and responsibly in debt”[[5]](#footnote-5).

The pillars which give strength and consistency to the edifice of peace are four: truth, justice, love, and freedom[[6]](#footnote-6). These four pillars are necessary for a well-ordered society and constitute the values that must be present in any society that is properly peaceful[[7]](#footnote-7).

The Church’s vision of peacebuilding points out not only the foundation and the pillars but also some building blocks, which are the concrete actions and measures that pave the path to peace. One of these building blocks of peace is the promotion of integral human development. Development and peace are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Modern challenges of poverty, hunger, disease, and illiteracy, among others, pose challenges to peace and create fertile grounds for conflict. In his Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio,* Pope Paul VI went so far as to say that “*Development is the New Name for Peace*”[[8]](#footnote-8).

Opposition to the arms race is also an important building block of peace. In one of his *World-Day-of-Peace Messages*, Pope Paul VI highlighted the sad reality of some developing nations that “are imposing upon themselves enormous sacrifices in the resources essential for life’s basic needs, cutting down on food, medicine, education, road-building, housing and even sacrificing true economic and political independence, so that they can be armed and can inflict fear and slavery on their own neighbours …”[[9]](#footnote-9). Fighting poverty instead of our fellow human beings is the way to true peace.

Support for international institutions that promote peace is yet another building block. Paul VI called the United Nations Organization(UNO) “the first among these institutions” and suggested that “peace finds its own home and its own workshop” within institutions that serve as instruments of world order and global solidarity[[10]](#footnote-10). Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and regional bodies (e.g. African Union) are institutions that have some potential to promote global and regional bonds of solidarity, as well as fashion an international order that enables peace.

A final item I would like to point out as a building block of peace is forgiveness. The theme of forgiveness is an integral part of the Church’s vision of peacebuilding. For Pope John Paul II, “Offering and accepting forgiveness is the essential condition for making the journey towards authentic and lasting peace.” For this reason, the pope wished “to appeal to everyone to seek peace along the paths of forgiveness”[[11]](#footnote-11).

In summary, therefore, ending the arms race for the sake of investing in development that eradicates poverty, building global institutions for a new world order, and bringing the transformative power of forgiveness into social life are three recurring themes that the Papacy continues to present as pathways to peace.

# In view of SECAM’s 50th Anniversary and the Canonization of Blessed Pope Paul VI

As you all know, the canonization of Blessed Pope Paul VI is set for this coming October. Paul VI is one of the Popes who manifested great love for Africa. Coincidentally, his canonization will take place just a few months ahead of the 50th Anniversary of SECAM, which he himself personally launched in 1969, in Kampala. Also AMECEA took its shape under his pontificate. As we look forward to these two events, I wonder if this meeting would not be a fitting opportunity to revisit Pope Paul VI’s message to the Church in Africa. One of the valuable documents with which he expressed his concern for Africa is his 1967 Apostolic Letter *Africae Terranum* (The Land of Africa), in which, among other things, the Pope advocated what one could call the ‘local ownership of development’. He also invited Africans to devise new ways of becoming missionaries to themselves.

Accordingly, the Church in the AMECEA region should renew her awareness of the fact that her future no longer depends on missionaries or agents of human development from other continents. Our continent’s future depends on Africans themselves and on the local Church, which is called to permeate the whole of society and transform it, becoming as it were “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”. The Church in Africa should now be able to take care of herself, capable of handling possible crises and moving the continent towards development. This, inevitably, calls for a renewed spirit of solidarity and “the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular Churches” (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63). Therefore, I exhort you to never cease strengthening solidarity throughout the AMECEA region and beyond.

# A call to reassess AMECEA’s Structures

Finally, in compliance with Pope Francis’ call to ecclesial renewal which cannot be deferred (cf. *EG*, 27–33), I think you would do well to also reassess the operational structure and effectiveness of this Association, reviewing its *modus operandi* in order to ensure that it is delivering the desired service. As Pope Francis clearly puts it in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory”. A missionary approach to pastoral ministry consists in abandoning the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’. “I invite everyone – says Pope Francis – to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (cf. *EG*, 33). On several occasions, the Pope has reiterated this call. For instance, in the Message with which He announced the Extraordinary Missionary Month to be celebrated in October 2019, the Pope says at one point: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion that cannot leave things as they presently are”. While speaking recently to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies, who gathered in Rome for their annual Assembly on June 1st of this year, the Pope humorously said: “Things must always be renewed: … otherwise, we would all end up in a museum”. Dear Brothers and Sisters, AMECEA cannot be indifferent to Pope Francis’ persistent call for renewal.

On behalf of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, I wish you all a very productive Assembly. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide you in your reflection, deliberations, and planning, in order to bring about the greatest benefit for your Association and your respective local Churches within the AMECEA region.

Thank you for your attention!

+ Protase Rugambwa

1. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, n. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Message*, 1999, n.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Id*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a synthesis on Papal Magisterium on Peace cf. Kenneth Himes OFM, *Papal Thinking about Peace since Pacem in Terris: The World Day of Peace Messages*, 1967-2013 in Journal of Catholic Social Thought, 1 (2014) 9-32; Card. Peter Turkson, *I messaggi per le Giornate Mondiali della Pace, 1968-2017. I papi tracciano la via per la pace*, in D’Avino M. – De Siervo U. (edd.). La pace necessaria, AVE, Roma 2017, 17-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul VI, *Progressio populorum*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Paul VI, *World Day of Peace Message*, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Paul VI, *World Day of Peace Message*, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Message*, 1997, n.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)