

Catholic Social Teaching and Political Reform Processes in Africa

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Conference

Catholic Social Teaching and its Social and Political Impact on the
Development of Africa

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I will only be able to provide a few brief comments and pointers in my contribution. And I am very well aware of the fact that you can only speak about Africa in very general terms, because the countries are just too different in their history, culture, structure, economy and politics. My intention is mainly to provide a few impulses on the topic.

1. According to estimates of the World Religion Database 2010¹, there are around 470 million Christians and 234 million Muslims living between the Sahara and the Cape of Good Hope, which means that around one fifth of all Christians worldwide live in this region of Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where Christianity has increased most strongly in percentage terms during the 20th century. In 1900 only 9% were Christian, in 2010 it was 57%. Islam grew from 14% to 29% in the same period. It should be noted, however, that traditional practices are often mixed with Christianity or Islam. Church

¹ See: Maria Zandt: The Situation of Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa, in: KAS International Reports No. 6/2011, p. 32ff;

attendance is high. This is considered one of the most religious parts of Africa. For many people here religion forms an important part of their daily lives. Church activities exert a considerable influence on people's lives and the way they spend their leisure time.

With a few exceptions, Christians and Muslims generally live together peacefully. Interreligious dialogue makes a significant contribution to coexistence of the religions. In a number of countries there is an interreligious dialogue going on that is partly institutionalised or taking place on a regular basis.²

2. Africa has experienced remarkable change during the last 15 years.³ Indications of this change include: the establishment of parliamentary democracies, recognition of democratic principles and an expansion of political participation. In 1990, there were only five countries with a multi-party democratic system, while there are over 30 today. Of course what we have here to a large extent are formal democracies, which are fragile, so that you definitely cannot talk of consolidated democracies. You would still have to describe roughly one third of the countries as "unfree". The political transition currently taking place is by no means a straightforward process. There are still considerable deficiencies. "Democracy in traditional, predominantly agrarian societies with a high rate of illiteracy, limited possibilities of social communication, and without working class or bourgeoisie worth mentioning, looks different from that in industrial societies."⁴ Governments too increasingly accept basic democratic rules, freedom of the media and greater participation of the population. Groups within urban civil society conduct themselves with

2 See the article by Maria Zandt, *ibid.*;

3 Cf.:Ulrich Golaszinski: Sub-Saharan Africa : The Rediscovery of a Continent, Compass 2020, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung May 2007;

4 Cf.: Ulrich Golaszinski, *ibid.*, p. 3;

greater self-confidence. They make significant contributions to the development of an independent democracy and the enforcement of human and civil rights.

In spite of positive changes, most democracies in Africa are faced with great challenges. People, parties, religions and institutions all have their individual difficulties in coming to terms with the democratic order. For many it means a radical break with the experiences and practices of the past – and partly also of the present. Areas where there are still significant deficits include responsible political leadership, the rule of law, tolerance and an authentic culture of democracy. Corruption, clientelism and patronage are undermining the democratic institutions and continue to jeopardise economic and social development.

3. In Africa too democracy has two elements. It is a form of government and it is a way of life. It will only work if the political system of democracy is built and supported by convinced democrats. In very simple terms you could say: democracy only works with democrats. But nobody is born a democrat. Democracy has to be learnt in a painstaking process. And democracy does not become established overnight either. It is realised in a long, laborious process beset by conflict. Nor can it provide guarantees for its own survival. It is dependent on prerequisites and conditions which it cannot ensure itself. The cultural identity of a people is one such prerequisite. Here, culture is understood to mean the people's way of life, which religion is a part of. If there are several cultures within a country, they need to come together and agree on an intercultural concept of democracy. That then frequently entails interreligious and peaceful cooperation. The economic and social living conditions must be safeguarded by an appropriate economic and social order. There must be a functioning rule of law in place, which protects people and

their rights effectively against the state. A new democracy must develop a culture of its own, and the ethics of democracy form part this culture. Countries will only succeed in mastering these enormous challenges if people look self-confidently to their own culture and are prepared to search for and find their own concepts and solutions to their own problems.

Each country will have to develop an independent democracy of its own. But this is first and foremost a political task. Within this context, politics should be understood to comprise the organisation of social coexistence and the resolution of existing conflicts. One key tool politicians use in their activities and efforts to shape their country is power. To me, it seems important to realise that in the countries of Africa the desire for change and for democratic development can ultimately only be realised by political means. Churches and religions therefore also need to become more political within this meaning of the word so that they will be able to use their influence to greater effect. They must become more political because, as Emanuel Mounier said, politics is not everything, but politics is in everything.⁵

4. I started out with these preliminary remarks to provide a sound basis for the question which I want to turn to now. It is this: What contribution can religions, Churches and in particular Christian social teaching make to the development of countries in Africa? In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation⁶, Pope Benedict XVI calls upon the Catholic Church in Africa to engage in a number of tasks. One important task is an in-depth study of African traditions

5 Emanuel Mounier: *El personalismo*; in: *Política y Espíto*. No. Especial, December 1972, No. 339, Year XXVIII, Santiago de Chile, pag. 67;

6 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Africae Munus" dated 19.11.2011;

and cultures. And the Catholic universities and institutions of higher education are being asked to educate the younger generation in the “light of the Gospel”, to research important theological and social issues, to develop an African theology. Students should also be given the opportunity of receiving instruction in the social teaching of the Church. No doubt one should add that the dissemination of social teaching should not be restricted to universities and students, but also include key players in politics, the media, the economy and culture. This will require independent lay movements to be established and supported, which should be the purpose and content of well organised and dynamic educational work. This is a way in which Churches and religions can make a contribution to the building of a country’s individual democratic system with a just economic and social order and an effective rule of law.

5. Christian social ethics is the ethics of society. It must deal pre-eminently with the issue of an equitable structuring of social institutions and with the prerequisites and conditions of life in a democratic system that is characterised by dignity and justice. The task is to examine the cultural, social, economic and political conditions of the concrete circumstances of people’s lives with respect to their ethical quality and to monitor them on an ongoing basis. The central issue is human existence in the democratic system. Human dignity, freedom and justice are essential topics in this context. Reflecting on these topics serves the aim of achieving greater justice, life chances and personal development opportunities for all. One particularly important concern is the improvement of the situation of those at the fringes of society. Christian social ethics deals with the world people live in and their social environment. And it needs to cooperate with other disciplines in this endeavour: sociology, political science, economics, education science, etc. This approach is most effective when the various disciplines come together to form an integrated cooperative alliance.

And what sorts of topics come to mind in this context? I shall just mention a few: intercultural personality, family, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, justice, sustainability, the environment, the ethics of the economy, the ethics of power, the rule of law and justice, education, the media and ethics, global development and option for the poor, conflict management and the culture of peace, ethical positions on health matters, democracy and political ethics.

6. In Africa too, Christians and Muslims share responsibility for the future. And not just separately but also jointly, particularly in Africa. The future is shaped by people. It is predominantly in the hands of the key players within society, who influence or determine the politics of their country. It is therefore a particularly important task for Christians and Muslims to come together and develop interreligious social ethics in their countries. This will probably only work if both sides are willing to enter into an honest and open dialogue. The purpose of this dialogue will be to communicate with the other party about some concrete content. Dialogue means that you need to do justice both to the other party and to the content. It needs to bear witness to truth. And that is not all that easy. Long periods of opposing identities have left a legacy of mutual fear, prejudice, lack of basic knowledge, religious intolerance and a heavy burden of unresolved history. Concentrating on issues of social ethics provides a good opportunity of initiating and developing Christian-Muslim dialogue. Theologians and specialists, on the other hand, should concentrate on issues of faith in the narrower sense. This is a far more difficult task.⁷

There is a greater consensus on values and standards within the ethical

7 On this subject matter: Veronika Elisabeth Kreyca: Dialog in Christentum und im Islam – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung sozialetischer Fragen, University of Vienna, Catholic Theological Faculty, 2008;

debate. At least that has been the experience of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung over the last 30 years with its inter-religious programmes in Africa, Europe and Asia. The dialogue about issues of social ethics is urgent for social and political reasons. The countries' future is at stake. It needs to be shaped with people working together. Very practical questions are at the forefront: How do people want to live? What form should democracy take? How should violence be dealt with, including religiously motivated violence? What can be done to combat hunger, environmental destruction and danger to life in the global world?

Interreligious dialogue about issues of social ethics must be more than a mere exchange of information. By entering into a dialogue, Christians and Muslims can jointly search for answers to social ethics questions and find possible concrete courses of action. The dialogue can focus on the demand for justice as the aim of all moral endeavours. The right to property and to work, overcoming unemployment, foreign aid, the international financial and debt crisis, the right to asylum, safeguarding peace, human rights, these are some of the common concerns. Of course there are also areas of conflict in interreligious dialogue. The position of women, human rights and the right to freedom of religion are some of the issues with inherent conflict potential. But people can exchange their views on these topics as well. Christianity and Islam are called upon to fulfil their moral and political responsibility in their role as advocates for the poor and disadvantaged. They need to raise their voices to promote justice for all.

7. In conclusion, I would like to tell you something about my own organisation, Ordo socialis.⁸ Ordo socialis is an academic association for the promotion of Christian social teaching. The organisation has set itself the task of using the

⁸ Further information: www.ordosocialis.de

means at its disposal to make a contribution to solving the problems and conflicts existing worldwide (climate, hunger, poverty, the financial and economic crisis, peace and democracy, etc.). Without freedom, democracy, a social market economy and social justice there will be no chance for the problems and conflicts to be resolved. In Germany and Europe, we have had extensive experience with social value concepts and guiding principles, which were developed by Christian social teaching. We make available texts by various authors from numerous countries in numerous languages. The Scientific Council is of particular importance in this connection. It includes personalities from numerous countries, who help us publish and disseminate texts written by themselves and others, which we also translate into other languages. In this work, we primarily rely on modern electronic means of communication in order to enable as many prospective readers around the world as possible to gain free access to the writings. This is our contribution to bringing some order to the present-day complex and global world.