

**INTEGRAL FORMATION, THE COMMITMENT AND WITNESS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND CONSECRATED PERSONS IN AFRICA**

*An exclusive Interview with Archbishop Anthony MUHERIA*

(Catholic Archdiocese of Nyeri, Kenya, and a Delegate of the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops at the Synod of Bishops, Vatican City, 2018)

**The Catholic Voyage:** What is your general impression of the Synod of Bishops now approaching its conclusion?

**Archbishop Anthony Muheria:** First and foremost, the Synod is a good experience. From all over the world we are able to share ideas and experiences. We see the Church in a wider context. Certainly, it has been a very good, positive experience. As well, the presence of other auditors has added a bit of spice to the Synod. You are able to see and hear the presence of young people, who also helped us in the moment of discernment. We have spoken a bit about that. It is a very good experience.

It is a wake-up call to us bishops, because I think it has been an abandoned sector of our pastoral. So to pay attention to them in a very specific way, and not merely pay attention to them as just a sector of the pastoral but thinking specifically that it is they who are going to carry the Church into the next level or frontier. Therefore, it is either we are going to strengthen their faith, so that it gets stronger, and so we are going to have better families; or, on the contrary, we don't do it and the Church will suffer the consequences of malnutrition of the next generation. So, the Church must take to heart the issues of: how do we meet the needs of the pastoral care of the young people; how do we change the methods and means of the pastoral care of young people; and how we give them a central role in the efforts to organize it. So, the Synod has been a very good experience for reflection and, as I said, it is wake-up call to bishops, it gives us time to think, so that when we go back to our Bishops' Conferences, we are ready to start some of the things we have heard here (at the Synod) while we await whatever will come from the Holy Father.

**The Catholic Voyage:** African young people are awaiting and expecting a lot from this Synod. What are the reality and principal problems of young people in Africa, say as distinct from other regions? What specific relevance has this Synod to young people of at this time in Africa, at least in Kenya?

**Archbishop Anthony Muheria:** My thoughts are both on Kenya and, even though it is difficult to speak of the whole of continent, I know the feel in Africa is more or less very similar. The reality of the Church is a mosaic; the problems of Europe are very different from the problems of Africa. But we need to listen to other parts because now the global world is inter-connected. We must also contribute the many good experiences we have had in Africa. In Africa the principal problems that worry young people are: formation for vocations, employment, and education.

At the same time, in Africa we have many young people who are in the Church, who are close it; they are very happy, and are proudly aware that they an integral

part of the Church. Young people are the joy of Africa. Remember that the huge percentage of the youth in the Church today is from Africa – and from Asia, if we may add. So, the future of the growing church is in Africa. Thank God, the young people are not running away from our Churches in the strict sense. They are still connected to us. The years of youth must be years of joy. We must take away all this pessimism and negativity, and give optimism, hope, happiness so that they can enjoy their youth, with its problems, but be on top of them. Pope Francis is talking about accompaniment.

African young people face some unique and concrete problems, distinct from those of Europe. First of all, there are many young people in the Church in Africa, who are happy in the Church; we have vocations. The problem is to form those vocations, to give them hope when there is hunger, when there is poverty.

In addition, employment is a very big problem in Africa. Young people don't have jobs, so they don't have hope. Africa's young people also have the problem of ethnic hatred, which is very strong. We must talk to them about that, about the need to live charity, to accept others, even if they are different, of other ethnic groups.

Thirdly, there is the problem of Education. Many of them don't have an adequate level of education. They haven't gone beyond primary and secondary school. The majority of young people do not have career. That's a big problem for their ideals and their dreams. In addition to these concrete things, there are also problems of corruption in Africa. They have been seen; they are introducing them to corruption, into a structure of corruption, into a government of corruption.... They see it as a normal thing; this is another problem.

Fourthly, there is the problem of the many emigrants in Africa. We have had this problem for more than ten years. And they come from countries of Africa: the Congo, Rwanda, many from Sudan, many from Somalia. There are many we receive there, but they live in very poor situations, without hope, without education. This problem is quite big. The United Nations helps us, but the aid that comes is very limited. It's not help to live, but help to survive. Then they try to survive up to a moment when they lose hope. Some have been in those camps for over 10 years; they don't know a normal life. Children who were born there, then even family life becomes difficult because people have nothing to do; then there are bad habits of life also.... etc... It's a very big problem, but unfortunately, no one talks about it. There is no talk of the problems we have in Africa. Until there is a disaster in Africa, they won't talk about these problems in the press. They talk about Africans that emigrate from Africa to Europe, from Iraq, OK, they are many, but we have a far greater problem there.

But another set of realities are the obstacles the young people face, namely, the easy lure to go into new churches, new Pentecostals, new prosperity Gospel... In other words, they are not firm enough in the faith, to stand up, with conviction, for what they believe in.

I would quickly notice and hope that, as an immediate effect, we are going to dedicate more time to form them; that we are going to affirm them; that we are going to mentor them; and hopefully give them the tools so that they can go through the new situation when they find themselves faced by other religions who try to seduce or convince them, or by the society of secularisation, or even by the greed that has

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come along with prosperity gospel and other ills that have come with it. Therefore, we must make them true witnesses. The Church in Africa was evangelised by very young people. The missionaries were very young when they came to evangelize Africa. And they were courageous, mature and they were able to do great things. Even now, the young people in Africa can take up that role in Africa if we assist them, so that they can rejuvenate the Church, by standing firm and making our Church even stronger in Africa, both in faith and knowledge but also in action, in self-giving in their mission.

*The Catholic Voyage:* *The Catholic Voyage* team knows that there some young Consecrated persons participating at this Synod. This is an encouraging thing: the Synod is also for your young Religious women and men. What is your message, invitation -- or even questioning, if you wish -- to young consecrated persons in Africa today?

**Archbishop Anthony Muheria:** The Consecrated persons in Africa have always been a great example. The missionaries came and gave a great example of self-giving. They gave their lives. Many died. You remember that when they were coming, some died after one or two years, but they never relented, they went for the Gospel. They stayed with us, they gave out themselves, they taught us total, radical self-giving. I think that is what the young people look for.

Young people have very lofty ideals. We can't give them half-baked ideals or faith. Young people exact the highest justice. We also have the highest Truth, and we can't dilute it for them, and it is the same thing also for the faith. Then we must think about how to "package" how to "wrap" it better for them. It must be sold well; we must try to communicate well, ever better, the Christian Faith and morals to young people and others. At the same time, however, young people must see it "pure" with their own eyes. And that's difficult. They are idealists who want something that is worth giving their lives for. We pray the Holy Spirit to illumine and guide us also in this regard.

So, I encourage the young Religious men and women and also the young priest not to dilute their self-giving. The real satisfaction comes from a real giving fully. When we start half-giving, then it becomes very difficult for us to be faithful to the mission. We have great mentors and we have great heroes, whom we must emulate. So, the young Religious and the young priest must look up to those young missionaries who came to Africa. And also to Blessed Cyprian Iwene Tansi who, as you know, was a young priest who gave a tremendous example of holy life and witness to the Gospel. It is not outdated. Today we need similar self-giving. Not necessarily martyrs in the sense of killing, shedding of blood. We have saints like St. Theresa of Lisieux to emulate.

If we are willing, we can be formed. Not only the young religious women and men, but also the priests, even we the bishops, must be ready to give a more radical self-giving in the service of the Gospel. And we need those heroes more than even now. The young people are capable, perhaps more than we the older ones. Because they have more energy, because they have more conviction, they are more driven, they are more enthusiastic. When age comes we lose a bit of enthusiasm, but these young people have it. I hope that that will bring a new rejuvenation to the action of

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the Church. Not just because they think they know more than the older ones, but because God counts on them now. This is their moment, this is the opportune time!

*The Catholic Voyage:* Kenya happens to be a privileged country in terms of growing number of Religious men and women, of Institutes of Consecrated persons, universities, and so on. These can contribute very much to the formation, isn't it?

**Archbishop Anthony Muheria:** Yes. We must very much thank God for the number of vocations in Africa. We must not take it for granted. We must form the young vocations. It is a great blessing now that we have them. Most probably we are going to be the ones to send missionaries back to other countries of older Christianity. But we must form them well in Christ. We must form them not in some half-baked Christianity, but in solid Christianity. At the same time, Christianity is not just knowledge; it is Christianity in life, it is a radically lived Christian life. And that is what we need a lot of formation for. We thank God for the vocations. We do not need to take it for granted. We must ask the Lord to send us more vocations, but we must form them – initial and permanent formation. This is true for the Religious, for the priests, the Bishop: it is necessary to form them in the seminary and formation houses, form them in the love of God, form them in virtue, form them in charity, form them in the virtue of chastity for God. This is not without struggle. Form them in truth and mercy, such that we must be ready to reach out to the people where they are, not just waiting for them to come, not just condemning them, but mercifully going out for them. Then, also form them in accompaniment, meaning being there for them humanly, being father or mother for them.

*The Catholic Voyage:* Thank you for granting us this opportunity and for sharing your thoughts.

**Archbishop Anthony Muheria:** You are welcome.