

EVANGELISING THE FUTURE
Conference on Mission in Africa (Nairobi, Kenia)

The international conference on *Mission in Africa—Evangelising the Future* was held at Tangaza University College in Nairobi from 23 to 27 September 2019. It was one of three continental conferences that are being staged in Africa in 2019, in Latin America in 2020 and in Asia in 2021, the outcome of which will feed into an intercontinental conference in Rome in 2022. The topics under discussion at these conferences are the History of Mission, Missionary Spirituality, Evangelisation, Mission and Dialogue, Inculturation or Interculturality, the Female Face of Mission, Mission and Diakonia, Mission and Development, Religious Freedom, Interreligious Dialogue, Reverse Mission, Mission and Migration, Mission and Violence, Mission and Liberation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, etc.

A forthcoming anniversary is the reason for this series of conferences. In 2022 the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples will be celebrating its quatercentenary. To mark this anniversary a global academic discourse will take place on how the mission of the church is being fulfilled today on

the various continents and how Christian mission can be understood in the light of manifold regional contexts and experiences. To this end the Pontifical Urbaniana University (Rome, Italy) and missio (Aachen, Germany) are organising continental conferences in Africa, Asia and Latin America which will discuss the understanding of mission on the respective continents. These conferences will take stock of where the mission stands in the respective context and considering ways in which it can develop into the future.

Three topics of special relevance for the continent concerned have been selected to give the continental conferences a clear structure. The keynote themes for this year's conference on *Mission in Africa—Evangelising the Future* were Evangelisation and Inculturation, the Female Face of Mission and Mission and Development, as these have been identified as constituting major challenges for Africa.

Mission und Inculturation

In the first section of the conference focusing on *Evangelisation and Inculturation* the speakers (Albert Ngengi, Peter Knox, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator and Yawovi Attila) examined the relationship between revelation and inculturation, the commitment to creation as a challenge for modern evangelisation, religious identities in Africa caught up in the tension between religious and ethnic identities, and an African interpretation of ecclesiastical law. In his paper on *The Environment: A New Frontier for Evangelisation*, Peter Knox, a theologian from South Africa, made it clear that the ecological crisis presents a major challenge for evangelisation. Drawing on the pronouncement made by Pope Paul VI, who regarded the split between the Gospel and culture as the drama of our time (EN 20), Knox described the split between the cultures of the present and concern for creation almost 45 years after the publication of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* as the new present-day tragedy. He recalled that Pope Benedict XVI introduced the aspect of inter-generational fairness into the discussion, which is crucial for the preservation of creation. In the light of ecological challenges Knox proposed a new relationship between human beings and creation and humankind's fellow creatures which should be characterised by friendship and sympathy: "We can live in a relationship towards them that cherishes their existence and elevates them to the status of children of God." Based on his understanding of inculturation he urged Christians to become the Good News for other creatures by not destroying their livelihood and subjecting them to massive exploitation: "In the process of inculturation, a positive presentation of prosperity might demonstrate that all people and all things have value—things natural, as much as the fruit of the work of other people—even those least on the road to prosperity." Knox advocated an understanding of evangelisation which transcends religious and denominational boundaries. Let us be evangelised by people like Greta Thunberg, he said, in view of the Fridays for

Future movement and the increasing awareness on the part of young people, in particular, of the ecological challenges the world faces.

The Female Face of Mission

In the second section on the *Female Face of Mission*, theologians (Anne Falola, Anne Béatrice Faye, Josée Ngalula) examined the often marginalised work of women in missionary history, the female transformation of a male-dominated understanding of mission, missionary challenges seen from the point of view of women and approaches to female-influenced missiology. Anne Béatrice Faye from Senegal addressed the challenge facing Christian mission in her presentation entitled *Femininity at the Heart of the Mission: Hope Amidst the Challenges Facing Africa*. She drew attention to the changed role played by women in the African church, where they no longer exercise just “subordinate functions” but have assumed executive positions in Small Christian Communities and church associations. Faye recalled the new esteem for women demonstrated in the course of the Second Vatican Council (GS 60) and in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*. In *Africae Munus*, in particular, Pope Benedict XVI said that “the Church and society need women to take their full place in the world ‘so that the human race can live in the world without completely losing its humanity’” (AM 55). She went on to illustrate the impact feminism has had in Africa and the offers other Christian churches make to African women so that they can develop their female identity. She also drew attention to the deplorable state of affairs whereby the number of women in the church hierarchy decreases in relation to the importance of the position and the principal decisions in the Catholic Church are taken exclusively by celibate men. Coupled with this was the scandalous fact of paedophilia, sexual abuse and the misuse of power in the church. As a key factor in the necessary transformation of relations between the sexes Faye referred to the communicative-symbolic and epistemological (!) argument that the message of a kenotic Christ has to be reconciled less with supposedly “strong” male connotations but rather with allegedly “weak” female ones. She urged that women should be given a voice as prophets in the church, preach in the liturgy and also interpret the Scriptures for male Christians. In conclusion she insisted quite logically that women should no longer be excluded from leadership positions within the church.

Mission and Development

The third section on *Mission and Development* looked with papers (H. George Njenga, Thomas Mwadeghu, Joseph Caramazza, Jan Dumon) at ways of evangelising the economy, dealt with the possibilities and limitations of an evangelisation of politics and discussed methods of holistic education and training for pastoral and theological purposes. Jan Dumon from Belgium

spent many years working as a missionary in Congo and later in the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples. In his paper on *An Integral Notion of Mission for the Teaching of Theology and the Formation of Pastoral Agents* he looked at the challenges of providing theological education and training for the missionary work of the church. He began by explaining his integral notion of mission and stressed that the mission of the church is committed to a holistic life for each and every person and to creation as a whole. He then mapped out the prospects for theological education and training based on such an integral understanding of mission. He criticised the fact that education and training often focus too narrowly on dogmatic issues. Dumon outlined the prospects arising from an integral understanding of mission encompassing education and training for pastoral workers. He suggested that practical experience in welfare and social work should form part of the curriculum and that courses should be offered on enhancing relational and communicational skills. At the same time, he urged a change of mindset in order to overcome clericalism, to gain a new understanding of pastoral work in a kenotic perspective as a service and, in particular, to reappraise the role of women in pastoral work, mission and the church and to promote fair gender participation.

Summary

In conclusion it fell to Paul Béré, a theologian from Burkina Faso, to sum up the key aspects of the continental conference. In his paper on *Our Mission in Africa: Remembering the Past and Contemplating the Future* he dealt with the history of mission in Africa, which is closely bound up with the history of Propaganda Fide. In his closing remarks, which he himself described as an *instrumentum laboris*, he sketched out ways in which—in an awareness of the past—the future of Africa can be shaped in the present age of a “second globalisation.” Béré urged the audience to reflect first of all on their own resources in quenching the thirst of African believers for the Word of God. He advocated an inculturation of the sacraments (especially of marriage) in Africa and the founding of new African theological schools, which was called for in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. In addition, he made a point of saying that scope should be provided for authentic spiritual and mystical experiences. With a view to the church he proposed that intercultural skills should be enhanced and multicultural structures established at all levels. In conclusion Béré recalled the challenge facing the Church of recognising the signs of the times—which often enough cannot be channelled in the hierarchical structures.

The first continental conference in Africa showed that the history of Propaganda Fide is closely woven into the history of the Christian mission and was always a reflection of its time. In the age of a “second globalisation” the church in Africa faces the challenge of inculturating the faith in Africa,

redefining the role of women in church and society and embracing the mission of contributing to an improvement in the living conditions of people in Africa.

The conference in Nairobi was organised by the Pontifical Urbaniana University, the International Mission Society missio and Tangaza University College.¹ The next continental conference on Mission in Latin America will take place from 22 to 24 September 2020 at the Universidad Católica in Asunción (Paraguay).

Klaus Vellguth

¹ Among the members of the preparatory team for the conference on *Mission in Africa—Evangelising the Future* (apart from Leonardo Sileo, Bernhard Kachapilly and Klaus Vellguth) special mention must be made of Joseph Caramazza and Marco Moerschbacher, without whose expertise numerous contacts and tremendous dedication the international conference would not have been possible.