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Address by Patriarch Abuna Paulos, Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarch at the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops in Vatican City on October 7, 2009.

In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit One God, Amen!

Dear participants of this great congress of Cardinals and Bishops.

I feel honored and privileged to be invited to this grand Synod and deliver a brief speech about Africa and Churches in this continent. I am especially grateful to His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, who wanted me among you today and who personally witnessed to me his love for Africa and his respect for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, during our last fraternal meeting here in Rome last June.

Africa is the second largest continent. It is home to all kinds of people with a great variety of colors who live in harmony and equality.

This spectrum of colors is a gift from God to Africa and it adds beauty to the continent. It is furthermore the proof that Africa is a continent where all kinds of people live in equality regardless of difference in color and race. Anthropologists, philosophers, and academicians confirmed that Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular is indeed the cradle of mankind. And the Holy Bible confirms this profound conviction. History, according to the Ethiopian calendar starts from Adam and Noah. That is to say that for the Ethiopians the beginning of mankind, our present and our future is marked today and forever by God and His salvation.

Africa, whose people's ancient dignity is written in the stones of the Axum obelisk, Egyptian pyramids, of monuments as well as manuscripts, was not only a source of civilization. According to the Holy Bible, Africa was also a refuge for people who were hit by hunger: this is the case of the Jews at the time of Jacob when they spent seven years in Egypt.

The Holy Bible states that the Jews and the prophet Jeremiah who suffered a lot from the aggression of the Babylonians were saved in Ethiopia and Egypt. People who were living in Middle Eastern parts of the world had been relieved from their hunger in Ethiopia and Egypt.

Jesus Christ Himself and Saint Mary were welcomed in Egypt, while fleeing the cruel threat of Herod. It is clear that Africans do care for humanity!

Africa remains a religious continent whose people have believed in the Almighty God for centuries. Queen Sheba had taught her compatriots about the Old Testament which she learnt from Israel. Since then, The Ark of the Covenant is in Ethiopia, in the city of Axum.

The son of queen Sheba, Manlike I, had followed her example and managed to bring the Ark of the Covenant of Moses to Africa, Ethiopia.

The history of the Ethiopian eunuch and the strong, well-organized Law of Moses, and the religious practices and cultures in depth that exist in Ethiopia indicate that the Law of Moses used to be practiced in Ethiopia better than that of in Israel. Still this can be witnessed by studying culture and living style of Ethiopians.

It is in Alexandria, Egypt, where the Holy Bible was translated into non-Hebrew languages. These African translations are known as the "Translation of the Seventy Scholars" ('Sebeka Likawunt').

Holy Scripture indicates that like the ancient times in the Old Testament, Africans have the custom of worshiping by the law of conscience in the New Testament period.

The then Ethiopian king of kings, emperor Bazen, was one of the kings who went to Bethlehem to worship the child Jesus.

The Gospel tells us that it was an African, a man from Libya, named Simon of Cyrene took upon himself the Cross of Jesus as He was going to Golgotha.

And behold, an Ethiopian eunuch had come to Jerusalem in 34 AD to worship God in accordance with the Law of Moses. By the order of the Holy Spirit, the eunuch was baptized by Philip. Upon his return to Africa, the eunuch preached Christianity to his nation. Then Ethiopia became the second nation after Israel to believe in Christ; and the Ethiopian Church became the first Church in Africa.

Great stories of faith have marked the first centuries of Christianity in Africa because Africans have always lived a profound charity and a great devotion in the New Testament.

Africa is the region from where celebrated scholars and religious fathers, such as St. Augustinos, St. Tertulianos, St. Siprianos as well as St. Athnasius and St. Kerlos come from. These fathers are celebrated both in the continent and world wide.

St. Yared who has composed beautiful Church hymns and whom the world recognizes for his outstanding creativity, was also originally from Africa. St. Yared is a son of Ethiopia. St. Yared's hymns are among the wonders of the world for which Ethiopia is known to the world. The deeds of all these Fathers characterize Africa.

According to scholars it is in Africa that the first Canon of the Holy Bible was defined. History also reminds us of the martyrdom of Christians in North Africa when, their kind, a non-believer, raised the sword against them in the effort of completely destroy Christianity. At the same time Christians who were mistreated and persecuted in different parts of the world came to Africa, especially to Ethiopia and have lived in peace in the region.

Devoted Ethiopians have also demonstrated their outstanding hospitality to the nine Saints and other tens of thousands of Christians who were persecuted from Eastern Europe and came to Africa in groups. The residences and the tombs of those persecuted Christians have been kept as sacred shrines in various parts of Ethiopia.

In Africa and in Ethiopia we have pieces of the Holy Cross. The right part of the Cross has been kept in Ethiopia, in a place called Goshen Mountain.

The Cross of Christ was carried also by the Christians of Africa. I am thinking about my Church that recently suffered a hard persecution during the communist dictatorship, with many new martyrs among whom the Patriarch Theophilos, and before him, Abuna Petros, during the colonial period. I myself, then a bishop, spent long years in jail before being exiled. When I became Patriarch, after the end of communism, there was much to be rebuilt. This has been our work, through the help of God, the prayer of our monks and the generosity of the faithful.

Africa is a potentially wealthy continent, with fertile soil, natural resources, and a variety of plants and animal species. Africa has a suitable climate and possesses several precious minerals. For it has been a continent with many untapped natural resources, many have still their eyes on it. It is also undeniable that the civilization gains in other parts of the world is the result of labor and resource from Africa.

Africans have done such blessed works for the world. What has the world done for them?

Africa had been badly colonized and its resources have been exploited. The rich nations who developed exploiting African resources remember Africa only when they need something from it. They haven't supported the continent in its struggle for the development at all.

Each and every nation of the continent have various problems and challenges. The problem could be social, political, economic, as well as spiritual.

While the living standard of the African peoples is lower than that of the rest of the world, there are some reasons why such poor living standards get worse and expand all over the continent. The lack of access to education is the major problem in which the

youth as a result fail to get enough education. No country and people do achieve development and prosperity without education and knowledge.

As we all are well aware, the HIV/AIDS pandemic could not be averted despite relentless efforts. However, we should encourage all those experiences that show us how to heal and resist evil, to give hope by creating synergy and by providing to Africa the same treatments Europe itself has received. At the same time other kinds of diseases are currently threatening badly. We call the world to work in harmony in this regard. The Council of All African Churches is exerting efforts to curb the problems being occurred in the continent especially the chaos which extremists are creating. Religious leaders of Christianity and the faithful in general should join hands in this endeavor.

Africa is enchained by heavy global debts that both the current generation nor the future ones can bear.

In what way should we condemn the civil war that is usually fought by child soldiers who are also the victims of these tragic violent acts. How to condemn the overtly and covertly displacement and migration of people?

The International Human Rights Law clearly states that any person under the age of 18 cannot be a member of any fighting group because he is a 'child'. However, some countries are currently forcing children under 18 into military service. This is a clear violation of human rights. Therefore, it is mandatory for leaders of African Churches to cry out as one voice that these behaviors have to stop at once.

Therefore, I would like to use the floor to urge all religious leaders to work for peace and protect the natural resources God gave us, and defend the life and innocence of children.

In a significant number of African countries, basic necessities such as food and potable water and shelter couldn't be realized. Generally speaking, most Africans live in a situation where there is a shortage of most of the basic human necessities and services. Though Africa declared its freedom from colonialism long ago, there are still many circumstances which make it dependent on the rich countries. The enormous debt, the exploitation of its natural resources by few, the traditional agricultural practice and unsatisfactory introduction of modern agricultural systems, the dependency of its people on rain which impacted negatively in ensuring food security, migration and brain drain of its people greatly affecting the continent.

I am hopeful that as their Graces African cardinals and bishops had discussed this issue previously, today this great synod would discuss the issue and propose possible solutions.

I believe that we, religious leaders and Heads of Churches, have a very unique task and responsibility: to acknowledge and sustain, when we deem it necessary, the suggestions that come from the people, as, on the contrary, to reject them when they contradict the respect and love for Man, that has its roots in the Gospel.

Christians are expected to be messengers of change in bringing justice, peace, reconciliation and development. It is what I saw pursued with determination and humility by the Community of Saint Egidio in all of Africa: fruits of peace and healing are possible, and they undermine all forms of violence, with the strength and the Christian intelligence of love. African religious leaders not only have to worry about the social works but also answer to the great spiritual needs of the women and men of Africa.

Apostleship and social works cannot be treated separately. Social work is the meaning of apostleship. Every word has to be translated in practice. Hence, after every word and promise, practical actions need to follow. Religious fathers are also expected to enhance the awareness of the public to honor human right, peace and justice. Society needs the teachings of their religious fathers in a bid to help them solve their problems in unity and to free themselves from being the target of a problem.

Thus leaders of African Churches, with the power of the Almighty God and the Holy Spirit, need to voice the language of the Church. It is also necessary to realize when, how and to whom to speak. This should be done for the safety of the Churches.

I am really very happy to participate to this Synod of the Catholic Church on Africa. I am an African. My Church is the oldest of Africa: a Church of Martyrs, Saints and monks. I carry my support as a friend and a brother to this endeavor of the Catholic Church for Africa. I thank His Holiness for the invitation and I wish to him a long life and a fruitful ministry.

Let us speak of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the heart of the Africans and Jesus will return to Africa, as he did when he was a child together with the Virgin Mary. And peace, mercy and justice will come together with Jesus!

May God bless the Churches in Africa and their pastors! Amen!