

CEPACS MEETING OF JUNE 2016

Engaging the Modern Means of Communications for promoting Evangelization in Africa with particular reference to Justice, Peace, Reconciliation and Development.

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Preamble

Your Excellency President of SECAM, Most Reverend Gabriel Mbilingi, Archbishop of Lubango, Angola, fully represented here by the First Vice President of SECAM Most Reverend Louis Portella Mbuyu, Your Grace, the Archbishop of Accra, who has sent his good wishes to this meeting, himself being unavoidably absent, Your Excellencies, Regional Chairmen of Communications, Secretaries General of the various regions here present, President of l'Union Catholique Africaine de la Presse, UCAP, Coordinator of the Catholic News Agency of Africa CANAA, Representative of the Catholic Media Council in Germany, Ms. Petra Stammen, Distinguished Secretary General and Staff of SECAM and resource persons here present and last but not the least Sir Benedict Assorow, Communications Secretary for SECAM. It is my pleasure to present this short paper on the theme of the meeting.

My first official outing as New President of CEPACS occurred during the last penultimate meeting of the Standing Committee of SECAM in Rome only in February 2015 during which I was reintroduced to the role and challenges of CEPACS and also presented as President to the Holy Father Pope Francis. For this reason I think I should not burden your expertise and experience with mere rhetoric. Besides, the fact is that this morning's programme is quite packed, I therefore will try hope to keep this paper very short.

Status Quaestionis

Were it left entirely to me, I would have changed the theme of this meeting and this address to read something like: "The Church in Africa: Telling Our Own Stories". This is because first of all I am convinced that the entire life of the Church is communication; communicating life, peace, unity, justice, reconciliation salvation etc. Secondly because if communication is authentic and wholesome these ideals

are necessarily the fruit it bears. Finally I think that the entire rationale of setting up CEPACS is to be the catalyst, the leaven in all the Church's activity by helping every department of the Church to tell authentic, effective stories of the Church's life and work either *ad intra* or *ad extra*. If that can happen, then the purposes of justice, peace reconciliation and other ideals will surely be fulfilled. With this explanation I trust that you will bear with me and focus on the thrust of this short paper as it leans more in the direction of what we could practically do to get the African stories, so rich with positive values and ideals out where they need to be told.

1. There is an African proverb that seems to me to express the situation appropriately which runs thus: "Until lions learn to write their own stories, hunters will remain the heroes of all hunting expeditions involving lions and hunters the two". What hunter would objectively document the death of his own kind from an encounter with lions? It is in the interest only of lions to do that and they are yet to write their own stories. The expression "tell your own story" has almost become a cliché all over the world. Peoples and organizations which languish under powers that do not represent or promote their interest are constantly urged to rather tell their own stories as a way of redress. No one on earth can tell your story better than you can? In fact, the rule of the thumb is: "At the very least, be the first one to tell your story"! This is because in today's gullible culture of "credibility by precedence", whoever first tells the story gets the credibility. Today, those who control the media tend to tell everybody else's story, naturally from their (the storyteller's) own perspective in spite of all claims to objectivity. The fact that the Church in Africa does not yet command sufficient media power and savvy to tell her own story is surely a major reason why we are gathered here. No wonder then that when the Standing Committee of SECAM met with Pope Francis, the Holy Father strongly urged the committee to give the African Church a stronger voice in the universal church. SECAM could not but take the Holy Father's words very seriously to heart. This is one of the reasons why even before the meeting, it had re-activated the Pan African Episcopal Committee for Social Communications, CEPACS with a renewed mandate to coordinate communications on the continent.

Generally, the Africa that is broadcast and more known all over today, even to Africans themselves is of turmoil, underdevelopment and conflict. This not untrue about Africa but it is surely not ALL about Africa. This is in fact also true of the Church' s evangelization mission. More recent statistics from the Vatican actually show that Africa is perhaps the fastest growing Church population in the world. This is only one of the positive issues of the African Church which gets less coverage that genocides, wars, bombings, protests and poverty. The African Bishops themselves through had caused this challenge to be well noted even long before that meeting with Pope Francis. That is why communications emerged as one of the five pillars of evangelization in *Ecclesia in Africa*. It was also thus noted by Saint John Paul II: The Synod Fathers acknowledged the fact that "the developing nations, instead of becoming *autonomous nations* concerned with their own progress towards a just sharing in the goods and services meant for all, become parts of a machine, cogs on a gigantic wheel. This is often true also in the field of social communications which, being run by Centres mostly in the northern hemisphere, do not always give due consideration to the priorities and problems of such countries or respect their cultural make-up. They frequently impose a distorted vision of life and of man, and thus fail to respond to the demands of true development" (EA 52). Thus in reality communication is re-emphasized as the mule, the beast of burden, which carries all other activities of the life of the Church. Getting it to work correctly enhances everything the Church does and says. So why do we not get on with it

Our weaknesses

The duty of CEPACS in my view is to help SECAM through its Committee of Bishops to formulate policies and procedures, organize, seek out and coordinate facilities, personnel and resources for formation and information for the Church in Africa. It is as such that we can help to correct that distorted vision of Africa life and reality. However there have been many obstacles in the way of getting this off the ground as is desirable.

1. The yet to be accepted role of the CEPACS Executive Secretary vis -a-vis the SECAM Secretariat, which sometimes stalls the smooth collaboration between CEPACS and the secretariat and its various departments.

2. The poor interest and commitment of the Regional Communication Offices to the role and work of CEPACS in the continent. In other words the Bishops, through the regions must own CEPACS and be committed to it by attending meetings, supporting its programs and funding its activities. So far since 1985 when CEPACS was reestablished so to speak, this does not seem to be the case 3. This is responsible also for the poor awareness of CEPACS and its activities even at some National Conference levels, not to mention the dioceses. People can only own and relate to organizations which give them beneficial service.

4. The non functioning of some Regional Offices weighed down by conflicts, poverty, poor leadership, lack of expertise and other factors.

5. Poor contemporary communication culture of instantaneity of contact and networking in spite of the advancement in digital and electronic media.

6. Poor competence of Communication personnel with new technology and skills of the trade

These are by no means imaginary problems. They are very real and debilitating and these are the demons which I think we must fight. Obviously many of the challenges can be mitigated only with a commitment to the saying that "where there is a will there is a way". The better our efforts are coordinated the sooner we shall enjoy the support of our partners and of our own people who are able to understand the needs we currently have.

Where we are at: our strength

In spite of the problems we have we cannot simply sit down and moan. We must try to see what good things are still left for us to move on for the future. Perhaps a theoretical blueprint which we have at our disposal to work help us in the future is the outcome of the recent survey conducted for the SECAM Communications Office by CAMECO and the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. The survey seeks to show what activities and of the Communications office need to be prioritized based on the need of respondents. We need to sustain the principle of this idea. We need such statistics and data at many levels. Without them planning can at best only be speculative but here is a starting point. With CAMECO here present we can have a deeper insight into the result of the survey. We can then study the facts and figures thus made available, establish what the priority activities are and propose

the procedure of action for the regions of SECAM. I thank CAMECO for such great service

If we talk about going from what is known to the unknown, the Catholic News Agency of for Africa stands out clearly as perhaps the most important initiative of the Communications Office of SECAM in recent years. It is good to note that since it was established a few year ago, with the approval of SECAM CANAA has made significant contribution to the communications landscape of the church in the African continent. The Coordinator of CANAA Rev. Fr. Don Bosco Ochieng has done so much to make the news agency functional and credible, currently issuing an English weekly bulletin which is already gaining popularity within and outside the continent. There are already plans to add a French edition, soon. He has with the help of a board officially registered CANAA. He will surely give us further insight into CANAA's future at this meeting. He deserves a lot of commendation.

The ongoing professional and ethical formation of African Media Professionals and practitioners in the Schools and Institutes of Communications, within Bishops Conferences, in dioceses and church establishments all over the continent is a positive activity to harness and encourage CANAA just held one of such in Nairobi, Kenya. Individual and group initiatives cannot be overlooked either. Some attention is being paid to the biggest "contemporary, overcrowded temples and synagogues of today", the stadia, public squares, malls, marketplaces and entertainment halls chat rooms, media platforms, all largely governed by the social media. The Church must find a strategy for presence and influence even in those open spaces. Such is the workshop "The Catholic Nun in the Digital Age" at which I gave a keynote address in Lagos last week. With over 100 nuns representing different religious congregations, members of whom enjoy privileged interface with children, youth women and the motley public in their mission and apostolate, a credible space could be thus secured for the message of the gospel and the values of the good news through even nuns.

There must be many of such institutions, training programs, workshops and initiatives happening all over Africa. It is important that CEPACS can also play a role

in inspiring, documenting, animating and supporting such initiatives without disregarding the principle of subsidiarity.

For example, the pastoral activities of the departments of SECAM, the training and formation programmes for seminarians and religious, the national and international activities of SIGNIS Africa, of UCAP, the coordination of media professionals and institutions and the inventory of human and other resources and facilities all over the African Continent, can all be more effectively coordinated and harnessed through a better organized CEPACS in Africa.

Africae Munus clearly supports such strategies in collaboration for the Church in Africa. It is worth quoting here

"The Church needs to be increasingly present in the media so as to make them not only a tool for the spread of the Gospel but also for educating the African peoples to reconciliation in truth, and the promotion of justice and peace. A solid formation in ethics and truthfulness will help journalists to avoid the attraction of the sensational, as well as the temptation to manipulate information and to make easy money. Christian journalists should not be afraid to show their faith! They should be proud of it! The presence and activity of competent lay faithful in the world of public and private communications should also be encouraged. Like leaven in the dough, they will continue to testify to the positive and constructive contribution which the teaching of Christ and his Church makes to the world.(145)".

Where we really want to be: a new perspective

For too long, I have read various reports stating that one of the reasons CEPACS does not function well is because SECAM is weak. I think the reverse is actually true. SECAM is weak because its communications organ CEPACS is not yet functioning well. It is obvious in all organizations in the world today that communications is the agenda setter and manager of all their affairs. We need a new attitude. No doubt, this kind of coordination and collaboration is needed among us to help our Continent. All across Africa, old and new challenges compel us to urgently find a more effective template for Church communications in Africa. There is so much demand out there for the African voice to help promote the sense of the Sacred, the Culture of Life, Social Justice, Peace, Reconciliation, Solidarity, Family, and so

on as values for which Africa is known and cherished. I often feel that instead of criticizing those who tell the stories of Africa badly or with selfish interests we ought to give them some credit for taking interest Africa in the first place. The prerogative is ours to make a difference. This exercise in networking and collaboration under the aegis of CEPACS will make a big difference and solve a lot of problems.

Happily, we have friends and allies who are only waiting for us to take the first credible steps and are ready to give us the support we need to thrive. Many international organizations which are not present here are interested in African stories from authentic sources. There are others waiting to be discovered. For example, when the Pope visited Kenya, Uganda and Central African Republic last year, some prominent media organizations contacted me for comprehensive interviews on what the expectations and prospects of the Pope's visit could be for Africa. I did give an interview but persuaded the media organizations to interview Bishops, priests and Laity from the countries which the Pope would be visiting. They asked for my help to be able to identify who could be a spokesperson for the Church in any or all of the three countries. For a period of three weeks I could only get a Bishop from Kenya who would agree to an interview but the time did not work out. The media agencies had to make do with what I from Nigeria could tell them and whatever they could pick up from other independent sources. This kind of episode around such an important event only shortchanges our continent and our interests in a world whereby in other continents, sources struggle to make their voices heard for their nations and people.

Going Forward

We must seize the impetus offered us by the Church which has continually made the point that Africa has a whole lot of great value to offer the world of today. I briefly recall Pope John Paul II who called Africa the hope of the future. As a reminder, I note that *Ecclesia in Africa*, clearly emphasized the need for CEPACS:

The media, especially in their most modern forms, have a wide-ranging impact. Consequently, closer cooperation is needed in this area, in order to ensure more effective coordination at all levels: diocesan, national, continental and worldwide. In Africa, the Church has a great need for solidarity with sister Churches in the richer and technologically more advanced countries. Programmes of continental

cooperation which already exist in Africa, such as the Pan African Episcopal Committee for Social Communications, should be encouraged and revitalized. As the Synod suggested, it is necessary to establish closer cooperation in other areas, such as professional training, structures of radio and television production, and stations that transmit to the whole Continent.(EA 126)

Pope Benedict in his post-Synodal Exhortation *Africae Munus* noted: "Exceptional ecclesial vitality and a theological understanding of the Church as God's Family were the most visible results of the 1994 Synod" (AM 3). He also made that memorable affirmation about our continent: "A precious treasure is to be found in the soul of Africa, where I perceive a "spiritual 'lung' for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope" (AM13). Pope Francis as well speaks of the family in Africa especially in the more recent Post Synodal Exhortation on Love in the Family, *Amoris Laetitia* as he paid tribute to "some countries, especially in various parts of Africa (where) secularism has not weakened certain traditional values, and marriages forge a strong bond between two wider families, with clearly defined structures for dealing with problems and conflicts" (AM. 38) CEPACS has a task to take advantage of this positive expectation in form and content of our African contribution to the life of the universal Church. Such consistent recognition of the worth of the African continent and cultures must be a driving force, strong enough for us to "take up our mats and walk", to borrow from the scriptural imagery which *Africae Munus* itself developed about the Church in modern day Africa.

Conclusion

The realities of today are simply very different from those of the 90s even on the African continent. There are improvements in air traffic and internet connections. More and more Africans, clergy, religious and lay faithful are receiving training in communications as well as in theology and other ecclesiastical disciplines. Many parts of Africa are beginning to participate in satellite, digital communications and are open to religious discourse and issues. We are also able to continue to count on the support and cooperation of our partner agencies from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications to CAMECO, Missio and others. There is a little more commitment to the work of SIGNIS the international association for Catholic Communication in Africa and UCAP can be a good springboard for even better appreciation of this. This can give hope that much of the challenges of the time

concerning attendance at meetings and contact with one another can be more easily tackled once we make up our minds to tackle them. If it is true that where there is a will, there is a way, then I must note that it is generally only the lack of a way that is denounced whereas the real problem often can be a lack of the will to act consistently and resolutely. All of us here present must demonstrate that will to lead the way.

The entire world is shrinking by coming together in various types of unions and alliances. It is a verification of the dictum that strength is found in unity. The Church in Africa must not be left behind but we must take the bull by the horns for the world owes us nothing at all. The world looks up to us to recount the African story around long cherished Christian values like the sense of the sacred, the respect for the sanctity of life and for the family. This world view common to all Africans needs to be broadcast all over the world today. It is the prerogative of all of us gathered here today to contribute ideas for the best strategy for getting the job done through CEPACS. I pray that we will at the end of the day exceed even these expectations.

Thank you for your kind attention.