

Living Faith Through Justice
AEFJN 25th Anniversary Seminar
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Rome, Italy

Response to Keynote Address: “Living Faith Through Justice: Old and New Frontiers”
by Akbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ

First I would like to thank Fr. Orobator for his profound and insightful treatment of the theme he was given.

In his opening statement he says: “In our day and age, the greatest threat, I believe, remains the attempt to reduce both concepts (i.e. Faith & Justice) to mere theoretical formulation or individualistic predilection, in which case faith would be a matter of what a person chooses to believe and justice an optional extra.”

For me this statement is not only correct but of decisive importance. And because I believe that this “threat” Orobator mentions, is real, I will add to my short comments on his presentation some additional comments taken from the Special Synod for Africa in 2009 which had the significant title “The Church in Africa at the Service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”, of which I was privileged to be member.

But first let me look at Fr. Orobator’s paper:

Deriving from the First Commandment Fr. Orobator goes though both the Old and the New Testament and he positions the terms of Faith & Justice firmly in the context of our present day world. He not only shows their full meaning but he beautifully succeeds to present their inherent challenge to believers. There is something to DO, he insists. And I have no problems when he uses this stage to show us how his own community, the Jesuits, accept this challenge and how and what they do about it. I do not consider this surreptitious advertising but a very necessary and desirable element of our being church together. If we really want to DO something we must stop being jealous and learn from one other. And that will always start with my readiness to listen to others and their story and appreciate them.

Fr. Orobator then briefly analyzes the status of faith in Africa and Europe and with the subject under consideration, namely faith and justice; he takes a look at the relationship of these two continents. I like his analysis and agree when he speaks of particular external and internal threats, like “while Europe is haunted by despair, Africa risks the temptation of complacency.”

Quoting Benedict XVI Orobator portrays “**secularism**” as the main malaise of Europe and he describes its matching part in Africa as “**sectarianism**”. He says: “Speaking somewhat generally, I am convinced that secularism does to Europe what sectarianism does to Africa”. And I fully agree with him when he adds that “neither system can serve as the basis or firm foundation for a notion and practice of justice that is human and humanizing”.

As a further threat to the symbiotic relationship between faith and justice Orobator mentions **the phenomenon of the gospel of prosperity**, which he sees as *prevalent in Africa*. And because, so he says, it spiritualizes concrete challenges it reduces them to the realm of personal shortcomings and misfortune, and hence does not acknowledge and challenge *structural injustice* at the root of socioeconomic and political malaise”.

And again I agree with this statement but one must add that the same phenomenon is alive in Europe as well, maybe even more so.

Then, faithful to the theme he was given (“**Living our Faith through Justice**”), Fr. Orobator describes in three vital areas what LIVING our faith could imply:

- Migration
- Ecology
- Question of gender

This exposé is very well done and challenging indeed. Fr. Orobator’s reflections are firmly based on the scripture and the spirituality of the Church and they are imbedded in the concrete human and socio-political context. His challenge is **undeniably practical!** It is something we can DO, **must** do, if we want to be Christians.

But having been asked to **respond** to this challenge I want to go back to the beginning of the talk. In his opening statement, as I have already mentioned, Fr. Orobator talks of a **threat** that the concepts of faith & justice are reduced to mere theoretical formulations and therefore

faith can easily become a matter of what a person chooses to believe and justice an optional extra.

I believe that this is no more just a threat. I see it happening. In society and in the Church and also in our religious communities! There is such a thing as “private” (“personally chosen”) faith and it separates people from one another and creates a flood of theoretical formulations that prevent us from working together in peace and for peace.

Because of this I thought of an additional word, in my opinion a vital component, which was part of the theme of the **Synod for Africa** I was in 2009 privileged to attend (as an elected representative of the USG).

As already mentioned, the theme of the Synod was: “The Church in Africa at the service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace”. **Reconciliation** is the element that I would like to add to our reflections of today.

I hope that I will be forgiven that I suggest adding this third word. But it is the very nature of Fr Orobator’s presentation that made me think of it. Many of his thoughts and deductions are the same as we saw during the synod. And very beautifully he deduces from the Bible the role and mission of Jesus Christ and following from there defines the purpose and mission of the Church. And this “purpose and mission” of the Church is primarily that of reconciliation which is initiated by God himself.

Allow me to quote just three passages from the *Relatio Post Disceptationem* which was unanimously adopted at the end of the Synod. And which, incidentally, was written by Cardinal Peter Kodwo Turkson, at that time still Archbishop of Cape Coast/ Ghana and after the Synod appointed Head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

1. “The mission of Christ which becomes the life and ministry of the Church derives from the life of the Triune God; and **when** we talk about reconciliation, justice and peace, **then** they need to be seen as deriving from God’s life. They belong to the *Kingdom of God*; and are lived through faith in Christ, through whom we become sons and daughters of the *Kingdom*.”
Therefore,

2. “The agents of the reconciliation, justice and peace, according to the assembly, have to be evangelized, converted, formed in the faith and be living witnesses in a life of discipleship of Christ; **for it is our common child-father relationship with God in Christ which is the basis of our justice and reconciliation.”**

3. “To ensure its mission of reconciliation, justice and peace, the Church- Family of God in Africa must become aware of her identity, ponder her being and act attentively to the truth and faithfully to her mission. Her members should themselves be reconciled within her and be a model of Christ the Servant. The communion among pastors, the witness of their life, their relationships with co-workers and their treatment of employees, are several areas which deserve consideration.”

So for the quotations.

It goes without saying that these extracts from a text written for the Church in Africa apply also to Europe and the rest of the world. And I like the reference to the relationship with and treatment of co-workers and employees, because this brings the point right down to earth, also for us. If I want to live my faith through justice I have to start at my doorstep. – Relationships in justice and peace, marked by reciprocated respect need to be established... and mutual reconciliation will help us to do just that.

So, summing up my response to Fr. Orobator’s address on “Living Faith through Justice” I want to repeat my appreciation for his presentation. It is scholarly and I felt and heard throughout an African brother speaking. We need the voice of Africa in the Church and in the world of today! May the God of justice, peace and reconciliation bless and keep you.

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