

Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo: “The Church cannot remain silent in the face of the illegal exploitation of mineral resources in Africa”

(Rome, October 14, 2024) – “Modern martyrs, victims of the exploitation of mineral resources in Africa: Realities and perspectives of the outgoing Church”. This is the theme of a conference presented on October 12 in Rome by Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, Metropolitan Archbishop of Kinshasa (DR Congo) and President of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). It was on the occasion of a hybrid webinar organized on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the canonization of the Martyrs of Uganda.

During this meeting held in Rome and online, the Cardinal President of SECAM lifted the veil on the numerous and difficult situations experienced by “modern martyrs”, especially “people who suffer and die because of the exploitation of mineral resources in Africa”. Indeed, “the extraction and transport of these minerals dispossess and displace families from their lands”. In addition, “there is often the violent demolition of homes, water contamination, air pollution with heavy metals in particular, the release of cyanide into nature, with serious damage to agricultural, livestock or fishing yields”. Illegal exploitations and situations with damaging consequences in the face of which, “the Church cannot remain silent”.

Here is the entire conference presented by Cardinal Ambongo, in Rome, Saturday, October 12, 2024.

Modern martyrs, victims of the exploitation of mineral resources in Africa: Realities and perspectives of the outgoing Church.

Conference by His Eminence Fridolin Cardinal AMBONGO on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the canonization of the Martyrs of Uganda

Rome, October 12, 2024

Introduction

First of all, I would like to thank with all my heart the Congregation of the Missionaries of Africa also called White Fathers for their happy initiative to organize, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the canonization of the Holy Martyrs of Uganda, this Conference on the theme "The Blood of the Holy Martyrs, Seeds of Hope for an Integral Ecology". I thank them in particular for the honor they have given me to participate. Following the White Fathers, I express my gratitude to all the organizers of this important meeting as well as to all the speakers. I greet each and every one of you who have come here, as well as all of you who are following us online. "Modern Martyrs, Victims of the Exploitation of Mineral Resources in Africa: Realities and Perspectives of the outgoing Church" is the theme that was proposed to me. 60 years after the canonization of Saint Charles Lwanga and his companions, we can rightly ask ourselves, what are the fruits of the testimony of these valiant martyrs of Uganda in today's Africa. What lessons and what perspectives can we envisage for the Church in missionary outgoing confronted with this great and formidable challenge that constitutes the reality of modern Martyrs, victims of the exploitation of mineral resources in Africa. In its project to preserve the common home, has Africa learned enough lessons from the tortures suffered by its children? How can we celebrate the 60 years of the martyrs of Uganda without looking in the face, the martyrs of today? To answer these questions, we propose a three-point approach. We will begin by better understanding the reality of martyrdom and its theological anchors, we will then examine the reality of modern martyrs, and we will finally end by opening perspectives for the mission of the outgoing Church.

I- Theological anchors

Let us first recall that in its strict sense, the Martyr is the one who bears witness to the truth of the faith, by accepting death and thus uniting himself to Christ through charity (cf. CCC 2473). Any believer who deliberately accepts the extreme consequences of the commitments of his baptism, and who, following the example of Christ, is ready to bear witness to his love of God and men up to and including death, relying not on his own strength but on the Holy Spirit who authenticates the witness of the disciple (Mt 10:20; Jn 15:26-27), is disposed to martyrdom.

Since the early Church, martyrdom by shedding blood has always been considered a grace of God, who deploys his power in fragile human beings, in the precise situation of persecution. Those who wanted to provoke martyrdom by their own will in order to be acclaimed as heroes have always been condemned, because it would then be a testimony of their own prowess, and not a testimony of Christ himself.

It is because the specific issue of martyrdom is the testimony given by weak beings to the person of Jesus of Nazareth who died and rose again, confessed as our only Lord and Savior, that a question deserves to be asked: what are the theological anchors that illuminate the testimony of the martyr? Among several theological anchors that seem important to us to understand in what sense the project of the outgoing Church commands to take into account the martyrs of our time, we retain two: the mystery of the covenant and the seeds of the Word.

1- The mystery of the covenant

In the biblical economy, the covenant in the Blood of our Lord Jesus is prepared over time by the covenant with Moses, with Abraham, the covenant with Noah which concerns all humanity and the covenant with Adam which encompasses all creation. In other words, the Covenant in Jesus makes the faithful in solidarity with humanity, the suffering in particular, and with creation. Consequently, the fate of humanity and creation cannot leave Christians indifferent.

2- The seeds of the Word

The Prologue of the Gospel according to Saint John attests that "The Word was the true Light, which enlightens every person by coming into the world" (Jn 1:9). The Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Justin, have commented on this affirmation by maintaining that the seeds of the Word have been planted in different traditions and cultures. We can deduce from this that everything that is true and just in the modern Martyrs has value for Christians (cf. LG 16; AG 9). This is why the Church regards these modern Martyrs with deep and sincere respect, even if their expression is different from that of the Christian martyrs (cf. NA 2). In this way, modern martyrs are all those people who were put to death for refusing to abandon their land, who paid with their lives to defend truth, justice and peace. Jesus rejoiced to see that the gifts of God cannot be restricted to a privileged few and extend beyond the group of his disciples. Everything that is done that is good, that is just, has a particular value and cannot be done against God, since it is the accomplishment of good. (cf. Mk 9:38-48). Thus, the fight for the defense of the poor, the exploited and for the safeguarding of our common home is a fight with God, a fight of God, a fight for man created in the likeness of God, a fight for creation, the work of God and this fight has its victims (its martyrs). Let us examine the expressions of these modern Martyrs?

II- The expressions of modern martyrs in Africa

1- The martyrs of the defense of (moral) values

In the defense of the truth, many people risk their lives in Africa. These include, among others, people who defend noble values. Let us recall that Charles Lwanga and his companions perished because they refused to give in to the ignoble practices demanded by the king. The

martyrdom of Bakanja and Anuarite is a refusal to bargain, in the depths of their hearts and their behavior, the truth of true human dignity revealed in Jesus Christ. The martyrs chose to glorify God in their bodies by the non-divinization of these bodies; they chose to glorify God rather than glorify their bodies by entering into the game of falsification of human greatness proposed by those who have political, economic, cultural or military power in this world. The martyrs of truth refused to reduce the Kingdom of God to a matter of social privilege, of clothes, of clothing, of material well-being, of power. The context of this martyrdom is that of the defense of Christian values in the face of power, and therefore of the domination or exploitation of the weak.

2- Martyrs of mining in Africa

Many people suffer and die because of the exploitation of mineral resources in Africa. The extraction and transport of these minerals dispossess and displace families from their lands. There is often violent demolition of homes, water contamination, air pollution with heavy metals, the release of cyanide into nature, with serious damage to agricultural, livestock or fishing yields. Thus, the possible macroeconomic growth that this exploitation brings does not improve in most cases the standard of living of the communities concerned. Per capita income becomes significantly lower, while only a small group of people get rich. That's not all. Let us also mention what happens with blood minerals.

The death toll from the exploitation of blood minerals is very heavy in Africa. In reality, the exploitation of critical minerals (tin, tantalum, gold, tungsten, etc.) and minerals of the energy transition (lithium, nickel, cobalt, etc.) gives rise to armed conflicts in several African regions. These minerals are present in batteries of electric vehicles, smartphones, laptops, etc. Indeed, under the instigation of Multinationals, armed groups locked in a vicious circle of financial logic, are fighting in several African regions. The war allows the control of the different mines, at the same time the sale of minerals is used to finance the war. This export increases the risk of war, because it supports the financing of armed groups, increases the corruption of the administration, feeds the secessionist sentiment of the populations who feel abandoned and makes the indigenous population vulnerable. All this mechanism aims to create a generalized chaos which especially prevents the development of the population directly concerned. The case of the DR Congo, my country, is flagrant in view of the paradox between "the abundance of resources that the country abounds with and the poverty of the Congolese population". Following the conflicts caused by the exploitation of these natural resources, the Congolese bishops made this statement: "Instead of contributing to the development of our country and benefiting our people, minerals, oil and forests have become the causes of our misfortune. How can we understand that our fellow citizens find themselves, without compensation or compensation, stripped of their land, because of the areas granted or sold to this or that mining or forestry operator?" Is it acceptable that Congolese workers are treated here and there without regard for their rights and dignity [1]? ...

In the DR Congo, in the space of 30 years, the war has caused more than 8 million deaths and 7 million displaced people. There are currently more than 100 armed groups sowing terror. Therefore, living in regions rich in mineral resources is fraught with great dangers: conflict, expropriation, respiratory diseases, illiteracy, etc.

So in these regions, Christians and non-Christians, men and women, lay people and consecrated persons rise up who refuse to fold their arms in the face of this tragedy and who, at the risk of their lives, and in the name of Christian and human values, denounce these situations, fight for social justice, peace, human dignity and the safeguarding of our common home. Many lose their lives and the earth continues to water the blood of these modern martyrs. What lessons can be learned?

III- Perspectives for the prophetic mission of the outgoing Church

Today, there are more than 28 armed conflicts in Africa. 15 African countries are the most paralyzed by these conflicts: Sudan, DRC, Somalia; South Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, CAR, Cameroon, Mozambique, Mali, Eritrea, Chad, Niger, Burundi. It is estimated that 40.4 million Africans have been forcibly displaced. A serious challenge for the Church in synodal progress that listens to the clamor of the people.

More than ever, our countries have become the battlefield of several battles where the watchword seems to be enrichment at all costs and at any price, the "maximization of revenues collected from the sweat of others, especially the poor who are exploited. Let there be no mistake: in this enterprise, Christians and non-Christians tend to form what Saint Paul calls "a motley team".

The martyrdom of Charles Lwanga and his companions, that of Anuarite and Bakanja and other martyrs of Africa are all surrounded by the reality of violence engendered by war and the thirst for power and material goods, by the will to power, which is not only the will to humiliate, but above all to crush, by the will to enjoyment with practices contrary to Christian morality.

Certainly, the conflicts generated by the exploitation of resources cause disorders that cause the premature death of several victims (cf. LS 48). However, in the face of all these Victims of the exploitation of Africa, the Church must courageously exercise its prophetic mission by denouncing injustices, supporting the struggle of the weak and proposing avenues for true reconciliation. The Church cannot remain silent in the face of this illegal exploitation of mineral resources which generates war and violence which tear the social fabric of our countries and jeopardize their future. Indeed, for more than a decade our countries have become the theater of conflicts and wars, which sow destruction, disarray, tears, suffering and death. Faced with this devastating and murderous violence, how can we celebrate with joy and gladness such a great anniversary of 60 years of the martyrs of Uganda, without reflecting together on this tragedy? How can we think about the future of our Churches without looking in the face of these many people who have aged prematurely due to subhuman living conditions, without seeing these faces of displaced persons disfigured by hunger, without listening to the shrill cries of these raped women, without hearing the clamor of these children working in the mines and these young people massacred gratuitously by warlords supported by international lobbies in search of wealth. How long will our Churches, our Christian missions, leave unanswered in terms of solutions to the serious questions raised by the murderous logic that decimates civilian populations? We understand here the prophetic and pathetic appeal of Pope Francis during his visit to the DR Congo: Take your hands off the DR Congo! The Congo is not just a mine to be exploited!

It is clear. By avoiding all silence, it is for our Churches to rediscover the lesson that emerges in the face of these dramas and tragedies caused by the exploitation of resources that powerful Multinationals steal from poor nations (cf. LS 95).

The outgoing Church acts like the Good Samaritan. She must be at the side of the marginalized Victims abandoned by the side of the road by working patiently for their healing, for their escape from poverty (cf. FT 71). This mission requires the outgoing Church to implement adequate environmental education and mechanisms for the participation of local communities in responsible management of environmental heritage. But the Church must above all exercise it vis-à-vis decision-makers at both national and international levels in order to find solutions to current conflicts and to prevent or address opportunities that may provoke new conflicts (cf. LS 57).

Conclusion

In celebrating the 60th anniversary of the martyrs of Uganda and in the face of the tragedies of today's martyrs, it is important for us in turn to continue the fight of all these martyrs by updating it in our various contexts and in the dynamics of synodality that calls our Church to walk together as the people of God and as a great human family guided by the Holy Spirit, in prayer, theological reflection and pastoral practice.

It is up to us as an outgoing Church, despite all these tragedies, to continue to constantly transmit the message of hope in the risen Jesus. Christian hope is something quite different from illusory hopes. Christian hope is inhabited by a simple conviction that the future has a face and a desirable face, even if we are unaware of its features. It therefore also holds that the form in which the present is given is not unique or closed in on itself. Something else is possible, which must mobilize us to face the present time and its difficulties. Strengthened by this Christian hope, the Church plays its part in the transformation of our societies.

May the Lord, through the grace and intercession of the Martyrs of Uganda, support and console Communities sorely tried by conflicts. May he inspire the various decision-makers with the paths of dialogue and reconciliation. May he commit us all to making our contribution to the integral development of the whole person and of every person.

[1] CENCO, "NEW WINE, NEW WINESKINS" (Mk 2, 22) Do not disappoint the nation's expectations, Message from the National Episcopal Conference of Congo on the occasion of the 43rd Plenary Assembly, Kinshasa, Edition of the General Secretariat of CENCO, n. 11. L

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