

**CALLED TO SOLIDARITY WITH THE CHURCH IN AFRICA:
THE CHALLENGE OF THE GOSPEL
AND THE COURAGE TO RESPOND**

**Delivered by Fr. Michael Perry
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The urgency of our attention to the Church and the peoples of Africa is prompted by two conflicting convictions: hope and concern. We write in hope, recognizing the history, strength, vitality, spirituality, courage, and capacity of the Church and peoples of Africa. We write with deep concern, witnessing the proliferation of armed conflict, a deterioration in health care and education infrastructures, the weakening of social and community structures, and an increasing spread of disease and other threats to the lives of our Africa brothers and sisters. (USCCB, 2001 “A Call to Solidarity with Africa,” p. 1)

These words taken from the U.S. bishop’s pastoral letter entitled “A Call to Solidarity with Africa,” provide the context and the challenge for this historic gathering at St. Charles Borromeo Church here in Kettering, Ohio and in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. **Hope and concern** – these are central themes in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the faith of the Church. These two themes are rooted in the foundational principles of Catholic Social Teaching, which find echo in the human quest for freedom, dignity, security, peace and a desire for a ‘world made new’ where all people share in the goods and bounty of the earth because they are provided by God for the good of all, not for the enrichment of the few and the deafening satisfaction of those striving to accumulate more.

Our focus today is to be on Africa, but what exactly do we mean when we say ‘Africa’? **Our focus is to be on Solidarity**, a slippery term that, if understood properly and taken seriously, makes heavy demands and offers unimaginable blessings to those who dare trod its path. **Our focus is on the Church**, and God knows how difficult the times have been in recent years for a Church battered by scandal, pulled in conflicting directions by competing ideologies each claiming to have special access to the mind and heart and grace of God – a Church struggling to define itself as a **‘pilgrim people’** on the way to God and who are to **pick up the broken pieces of humanity** along the way, much like the Shepherd collected the lost and forsaken sheep, **one by one by one by one**. **Our focus today is on Faith-Informed Action**, one that seeks to bring the grace and hope of the Gospel to each and every human situation in a way that is **prophetically pragmatic**. Our action is guided by charity, but it is defined and articulated by justice, the quest that Paul so clearly articulates in his writings to the communities of Corinth, Ephesus and elsewhere, that we who have been brought close to God by the life, death and resurrection of God’s son are now commissioned and empowered to be God’s ambassador’s of reconciliation and a healing presence in the world. It is **God’s solidarity with humanity** – with each and every human person – brought to perfection in

Jesus Christ but present everywhere because of an abundance of grace and love (Jn. 3,16) **that ignites our imaginations and calls us to action.**

Church Witness to Solidarity

After much wrangling and prayer, Bishop John Ricard, Ken Hackett and I, together with Bishop Daniel Awok and staff of the Sudan Bishops' Conference and CRS were granted visas to visit the southern region of Darfur in Sudan. Many if not most of you gathered here today are aware of what is taking place in a region of Sudan, Darfur, is one of the most unwelcoming of geographical regions in the world. Even under the best circumstances absent of war and conflict, many parts of Darfur provide few opportunities to individuals and communities seeking to live, work, survive and thrive. The complex history of the region, its isolation and marginalization by the central government, the continuous movements of armed insurgencies through the region, a logic of denigration and conquer through dividing by a government driven by power, greed, racism – all of these add to the complexities of the Darfur crisis.

We arrived in Nyala where we met the governor of the region, a tall, well-educated and astute man who told us of the efforts of the government in Khartoum to stabilize the region, bring peace and development to the people and to create an inclusive political process for the future of Darfurians. After the meeting, we drove to Kalma Camp where more than 80,000 internally displaced people were huddled together in tents provided by the UN. Because of rioting and insecurity, we could not enter the camp – the Sudanese military would not allow us access – but we spoke with humanitarian aid personnel who told us that people in the camp were angry with the 'police' and other security forces assigned to protect innocent civilians at the camp. A number of these security forces were recognized by the internally displaced camp-dwellers as the same Janjaweed perpetrators who had attacked, killed, raped, looted and burned their people and villages. While waiting receive word that our entry would not be permitted, we overheard complaints and several stories from the IDPs recounting how they were attacked in their home villages, chased from one insecure zone to another, and how they hoped that Kalma would provide them with at least a minimum of security and access to foods, water and other non-food items vital to survival in such a harsh region. One older man spoke of his desire to **recover his humanity**, to be able to live together with his family and neighbors in security and peace. They were very clear about the source of their crisis: a greedy, hate-mongering, violence-perpetuating ruling elite in Khartoum that had come to power and remained in power through force.

Our failed efforts to visit the suffering people of Darfur huddled in Kalma Camp provided us an opportunity to meet other Darfurians who were literally 'on the run', living on craggy fields of stone and sand, devoid of any semblance of trees or bushes or anything that might provide shade or sustenance. It was here among more than 10,000 innocent women, children and a few men and boys that we heard a very different story than that portrayed by the governor of southern Darfur.

Aisha is her name. She must now be 17, but was only 14 when I first met her, huddled under a flapping piece of torn plastic held up by long twig-like branches, the size of a large round table in one of our banquet halls in the US. Aisha and her siblings were literally 'on the run'; one week prior, they were chased from their last rocky promontory about five days walk from Mershing where we met them. Looking around at her three

siblings – two younger sisters and a little brother of 3 years of age – Aisha described the events of the past more than 10 months during which she, her siblings, and a number of other ‘families’ had been chased from one craggy field of rocks to another by marauding Janjaweed militias. She spoke of the planes that flew overhead and dropped **‘boomers’** everywhere, killing fellow villagers and some of the animals. Aisha recalled how strange **green machines with three wings in a funny position** (helicopter wings of Russian attack helicopters) flew overhead and spewed gunfire into her village, and later into one of the camps where she and thousands of others were gathered and from where they would go out to collect firewood and water and food. Tears formed on the inner edges of her eyes as she painfully described the humiliation and shooting of her father, uncle, three other neighbors, -- **and her favorite cow**. She turned away from us for a time – as if the memories of pain and terror were too intense and dangerous to allow others to come into contact. As she gazed off into the wind-blown heat, she caught sight of two families living in similar conditions, of two other girls too young to be old, too wounded to be healed – a simple nod was exchanged between these two child-adults, as if each understood the trauma and fear they bore in their bodies, their spirits, but also the hope they held for themselves and their surviving siblings. Perhaps she was seeking a moment of consolation – or a chance to imagine what life might be like if she could return to a time before the violence and the Janjaweed, a chance to once again play and laugh and dance, to experience life ‘as a child’. Turning back, trembling, she began to recount the events that led to her mother’s death. Aisha spoke of the repeated raping and beatings her mother endured at the hands of a taunting crowd of armed militiamen. She spoke – haltingly – of her mother’s suffering and cries, of the one-two-three thud sound, and of the silence that followed. Her mother’s voice – gone - but Aisha could not see where it went. She heard only the laughter and jokes of those who took her mother and raped and beat her. “Victory; ‘Kaffir slave’ (hudud), death to enemies!” As the Janjaweed walked off into the forest of stone and sand, Aisha remained still, terrorized by violence, paralyzed by fear and a sense of tremendous loss at the violent death of her mother. She was drawn immediately to the lifeless, bruised, bleeding body of her mother. She could not understand why such hatred and humiliation existed, why it was turned against her family, why it made those men kill her father, uncles and others in the village. Aisha told us she would try to be as **good a ‘mother’ to her younger siblings** as her mother had been to her. She knew that each day not only would she live with the horrible memories of past atrocities; she and her siblings and others in Mershing camp were **the ‘hunted’**. Each day they awoke to new threats of security. Each day they would choose who would be selected that day to go out to seek firewood, food and water – who would face the danger of being caught by armed groups, possibly raped and humiliated, even killed.

Aisha’s story is not only an act of courage; it is represents a concrete example of the practice of ‘Solidarity’. Despite the trauma and burden she bore, Aisha was not caught up in hate-mongering, nor did she expound on the geopolitics of Darfur, the machinations of political and economic actors bent on amassing as much power and money to maintain the status quo throughout Sudan – arming and manipulating Arab herders and others willing to participate in the killing and maiming of innocent civilians – while pursuing economic interests, particular oil exploration, in the region of Darfur, together with Chinese and other investment partners.

Aisha had more pressing matters to deal with, the care for her siblings – providing food, security, love and hope despite all the odds against success. She also had to care for those living in the other plastic households across the rocky field. In the midst of horror, terror, shame and fear **there arose in Aisha an indomitable spirit of courage, resistance, resilience as she reached out to siblings and the children of neighbors and demonstrated ‘prophetic solidarity’, grounded in the daily caring and tending to the needs of those near. She spoke of God, Allah – a God who would never abandon her and her loved ones despite what had occurred in her village and the time since being driven from her home. She spoke of a place she would like to live, where she could have favorite cows and maybe even a camel.

Africa’s story – the story of marvelously unique identities, talents, spiritual vitalities, and professional capacities - **is not about** misery, illness, violence, suffering, and pain. **Africa’s story contains moments where humanity forgets its proper identity and vocation** allowing itself to be manipulated by forces within and from without. **Part II of the document “A Call to Solidarity with Africa”** recognizes the tremendous challenges confronting the 53 plus one nations of Africa – each uniquely gifted, each uniquely challenged both by legacies of colonialism and the deep wound of slavery that continues to cry out from Gore and El Mina, from the bowels of the Atlantic and the cotton fields and sugar cane plantations of southern US and the Caribbean islands and farther south to Recife. “We also are aware of the many destructive forces that have robbed, and continue to threaten, the integral development of the peoples and nations of Africa,” write the US bishops. “Slavery, a system fundamentally evil and base, stole from the African continent many of its most precious resources...our own nation, as well as the rest of the Americas, still lives with the [pernicious] effects of [the legacy of slavery].” They continue, “The legacy of Africa’s colonial past has contributed to the conflict, disorder, and animosity among the many ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Conflict and instability in Sudan, Rwanda, the DRC, and elsewhere can be traced to colonial programs of alienation, discrimination, social exclusion, and manipulation of ethnic identity intended to insure domination over vast geographical areas and tremendous human and natural resources.” Some analysts argue that the pervasive pessimism and scale of neglect that the nations of Africa experience from the West reflect long-standing prejudices and geopolitical concerns that undermine many of the efforts of leaders – governmental and civilian – to construct societies capable of caring for their people and becoming instruments for social transformation within and beyond their own boundaries.

Africa continues to draw the attention of the international community for reasons for a wide variety of reasons, most of which are less than altruistic. As the well-prepared document of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati Mission Office (October 2006/June 2007), “Stand with Africa,” so clearly articulates, there remain many external and internal challenges to the social, economic, political and environmental development of the nations and peoples of Africa. The cost of **excessive consumption** in some parts of the world, the drive for oil, timber, precious metals, diamonds and other exportable commodities – the satisfaction of all of these comes at a cost. Blood diamonds wear so well on the hand of a newly wedded woman, but they might have cost the hand of a young girl or boy in the African country from whence it came. With nearly 20% of our oil coming from the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, from Angola and from Nigeria, the

US government and oil companies are willing to turn a blind eye to the abuses and violence exacted upon individuals and communities in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, the Cabinda communities in Angola, the degradation of natural environments, the contamination of water sources and fields no longer available for agricultural development.

In **Part III of “A Call to Solidarity with Africa,”** five key areas are delineated where a change in the nature and practice of political and economic relationships are required if both the nations of Africa and the rest of the world are to create conditions for integral human development, achieve goals of peace and stability, stanch the global flow of arms - a very lucrative market for the US since we are the largest single producer and exporter of all types of weaponry - collaborate in the struggle against global terrorism, **and** provide fresh and equitable opportunities for all regions of the world to contribute to – and benefit from – **trade systems** that promote the rights and dignity of all people. These Five areas are:

- **Economic Development and an End to the Vicious Cycle of International Debt.** [An increasing number of countries are benefiting from the HPIC debt relief program, but there remain many questions about the nature and impact of the HPIC program, need for new and more favorable mechanisms that will promote the agenda of the nations of Africa; there also remains a number of questions regarding the professional capacity and political willingness of African leaders and governments to structure more effective economic programs designed to benefit the good of all the people in a given country.] [There also are increasing challenges posed by significant shifts in international development theories and practice – the politicization and, quite possibly, the militarization of development assistance based more on the strategic objectives of donor nations than on the real needs of the people of the nations of Africa.]
- **Strengthening and Expansion of Health Care Responses and Systems** to attend to urgent needs and growing global threats, particularly HIV and AIDS, multi-resistant forms of TB, Malaria, and a wide range of other Preventable Diseases. [65% of all current and new HIV infections worldwide is in Africa; increased access to anti-viral drugs and medicines to treat opportunistic opportunities are providing some relief to communities devastated by the virus, but many problems remain regarding delivery, professional monitoring of drug dispensing/compliance to protocols/professionalization of staff, travel to clinics to collect drugs and monitor viral loads, stigma and discrimination, cultural perceptions and practices limit greater success in the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS.]
- **Promoting the Development of Strong Educational Programs and Opportunities,** recognizing that one of the greatest instruments to conflict prevention, economic development, decrease in infection rates of HIV and other transmissible diseases is education. [Indicators developed by such organizations as the Global Peace Initiative, the UN Development Program, those working on issues of peace and security suggest a strong

link between reduction in poverty, conflict and migration and increased access and participation in educational advancement. In a recent book entitled *Too Poor For Peace*, [L. Brainard, D. Chollet, 2007, especially chapter 6, Hendrik Urdal, “Demographics of Political Violence,” (pp. 90-100), “education is generally expected to increase the opportunity cost of rebel labor. This implies that rebel recruitment is more costly and rebellion less likely the higher the level of education in a society.”]

- **Recasting Trade Relationships according to just and equitable rules and mechanisms.** [This includes not only creating what some call a ‘level playing field’, which involves renegotiating international trade agreements that include the active participation AND DEFENSE of the rights of weaker trading nations throughout the process, and greater transparency in the negotiating and reporting of tax and royalty agreements – what comes to mind here are the oil agreements by such conglomerates as Exxon Mobil, Conoco, Shell, etc. – “*Managing risks and maximizing profits cannot come at the cost of exacerbating social problems or fueling conflict...*” (Brainard, 2007, p. 20-21).]
- **Supporting Peacebuilding Activities and Programs in Africa**, which will help strengthen and promote peace and stability beyond the continent. [This is one of the greatest areas of challenge and opportunity for the peoples and nations of Africa, and for the Church in particular. The 2009 Synod on Africa has placed the theme of “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace” precisely because of the urgent needs for peace, justice, reconciliation and healing present on the continent, but also because of the increased commitment to and capacity for engaging in these activities by the Church. We have only to look at the example of the Church in Southern Sudan where Peace Villages are being established to deal with trauma and inter-communal violence. Or the Acholi Religious Leaders’ Peace Initiative guided by Archbishop John Baptist Odama. Or the Bishop Hurley Peace Center in South Africa established to provide training in peace and reconciliation throughout the southern African region. Or the Burundi Catholic Church Peace Initiative designed to provide sporting and other cultural events as a means to create a culture of non-violence. Or the West Africa Peace Institute (WANUP), which promotes active non-violence, the engagement of communities in social and political transformation with recourse to non-violent means. And yet, we recognize the tremendous challenges ahead for the Church, peoples and nations of the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Angola, Somalia, Egypt, the DRC, and Sudan as it prepares for a possible new war between the north and the south. [Many of you are involved in promoting various forms of peacebuilding and reconciliation in southern Sudan, northern Uganda, healing of individuals, families and communities traumatized by HIV and AIDS and through your extending of a hand of hospitality and creating opportunities for support and integration of newly arriving Africans to the US, and into our faith communities.]

AND

- **Assisting Refugees and Displaced Persons**, and people who are trafficked for labor or for the Commercial Sex Trade. [We are particularly challenged to create new ‘centers of hospitality’ and develop ‘ministries of welcome’ and ‘liturgical opportunities for immigrants’ that celebrate the gift they are to the Church in the United States. We need also to create ‘listening spaces/circles’ in our communities where people traumatized by war, displacement, severe poverty, loss of family members because of HIV and AIDS and other forms of suffering might share their stories as part of a healing process and as a way to unleash their gifts for the receiving communities. As the USCCB pastoral on *Welcoming the Stranger* so clearly recognizes, “*Immigrants, new to our shores, call us out of our unawareness to a conversion of mind and heart through which we are able to offer a genuine and suitable welcome, to share together as brothers and sisters at the same table, and to work side by side to improve the quality of life for society's marginalized members.*” Immigrants sometimes can help the larger US community recognize the world is not as ‘flat’ and mono-dimensional as it appears. They also can help local communities look beyond pettiness and bickering over issues that have little or no relevance in the larger scheme of things.
- I would add a sixth elements, that of **Water and the Environment**, the next round of regional, continental and world-wide crises and sources of conflict. This area calls each of us to examine our consumption habits related to water and recognize we must change our relationship to water, and to a wide range of other practices (cars and oil consumption, heating oil and air conditioning, electricity, etc., waste of food, etc.) in order that more and more people might have sustainable access to improved living conditions. As I stated earlier, the consequences of some of what we see are not purely historical distortions of political, economic, social and other relationships; they reflect current trends and attitudes that can negatively affect the poorest among us.

From Talk-Talk to Walk-Walk: Steps for Making Solidarity Real, Catholic and Effective.

The final part of the document on *A Call to Solidarity with Africa* recognizes the tremendous challenges confronting not only the continent of Africa – the more than 860 million people, the more than 140 million Catholics and the more than 400,000 lay catechists (bet you thought I would tell you how many priests there are – 10,800; bishops – 620; 2,800 lay missionaries; 54,000 religious sisters; 7,100 religious brothers) – the inheritance of structures and methods of evangelization and pastoral life no longer adequate or ‘maintainable’ into the foreseeable future for a Church that is **dynamic, rapidly growing (+2.75% per year), innovative, and increasingly engaged in the faith-justice nexus.**

Taking Concrete Action Steps:

I offer a series of concrete steps, which are not given in any particular order, but reflect experiences arising from places where individuals, communities, dioceses, others

have recognized the obligations and blessings of solidarity with the Church, peoples and nations of Africa and beyond. These steps are offered as illustrative and not exhaustive.

- **Fundamental Openness** to the Mystery of God working in the nations, people and Church in Africa.
- **Inclusive Prayer for Spirituality of Solidarity** – Eucharist is the ultimate witness and model for human solidarity – we are invited to follow Jesus’ model of solidarity, to be broken for the many so that all might have life in abundance.
- **Responsible Action:**
 - **Campaigns** – CRS Africa Campaign; Operation Rice Bowl; Save Darfur Coalition; Debt Campaign; Social Corporate Investment; End to Arms Trafficking; Struggle to end Human Trafficking; etc.
 - **Divestment:** “money makes the world go round and round and round.” - 3 principles: ‘no harm’; ‘good’; ‘active corporate participation’ – Corporate Social Responsibility.
 - **Self-Education and Involvement in Public Advocacy.**
 - **Diocesan, Parish, Group Twinning.**
 - **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Africa Fund** – promote and support it in parishes.
 - **Catholic Relief Services, other Catholic agencies** involved in emergency relief, short/mid/long term integral human development, peacebuilding, and health.
 - **Trouble everyone you know**, including your local faith community/parish, pastor, family members, local private companies, political officials, Church officials to take more focused, targeted and effective action for one of the many areas demanding attention – promoting peace, integral human development, respect for/dignity of human persons, support for people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS, etc.

Everyone Matters; Small Actions Count; Change is Possible.

In a well known book entitled *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell informs us of three basic characteristics that produce the effect of contagion and social change. Contagiousness, little causes having monumental effects, and change happens at one dramatic moment – these three characteristics are what define epidemics and what can tip the balance and lead to fundamental and permanent social change. But in order for us to grasp how tipping points occur, how we as social agents can affect a seismic shift in the way discrete aspects of social life operate, is to open our minds and change the way we think about things. This is not only critical for social change; it is what is most urgently needed for those present here seeking to engage with the Church and peoples of Africa. We must give up all notions of the ‘Heart of Darkness’, the Conradian approach to Africa. We must allow Africa to speak for herself, revealing her profound richness, complexity, suffering and hope.

In his work entitled *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford, 2005, pp. viii, ix) Mennonite peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach speaks of human beings living in a ‘vocational home’, that life is meant to be one of discovery, of

promoting the type of existence God intends for all. “The wellspring [for peacebuilding, and indeed for all actions promoting social transformation] lies in our moral imagination, which I will define as the *capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.*” I would extend this challenge to each of you – each of us – as together, US citizens, those born here and those recently arrived; those whose ancestors were beaten and chained and transported forcibly across the great Atlantic abyss; those whose ancestors fled religious, economic and other forms of persecution and exclusion in Europe and elsewhere; those who are recent arrivals from one of the 53 plus one nations of Africa. We are all called to probe the depth and breadth of Solidarity, to live it in our daily lives, to extend it to the entire world – and especially Africa, the focus of our time together today – to “give birth to the types of structures and relationships – and I underscore RELATIONSHIPS – that do not yet exist.

I close with a quote from the US Bishops’ 2001 pastoral, *A Call to Solidarity with Africa*:

*The Synod for Africa reminded us of the astonishing richness of the cultures of Africa and the profound contributions that the Church in Africa has made to the universal Church [and world] from its earliest history. We indeed mutually enrich each other in mission when we engage one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, in whom we find our true riches and our lasting hope. The critical challenges and enormous potential facing Africa today serve as the opportunity for – and test of – our mutual solidarity. Our response to this vocation of solidarity with the Church and peoples of Africa enables us to express love ‘in deed and in truth’ (1 Jn 3, 18), a love that creates no borders and sets no limits to what might be accomplished **together in Christ.***