

**ALL AFRICA CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES
11TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

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**THEME: RESPECTING THE DIGNITY AND GOD'S IMAGE
IN EVERY HUMAN BEING**

Key note speech by

REV. (DR.) SAMUEL KOBIA

Dignity is a birthright! All human beings are imbued with value and worth. Recognizing and respecting the dignity of all human beings means that it is unethical to exploit or treat them merely as instruments to further one's own personal goals or interests. Honouring the dignity of others has nothing to do with any of their unique qualities or accomplishments. That also means one's dignity cannot be taken away; but it can, and often is, compromised, violated and undermined. Even so, longing for dignity remains a basic feeling in all human beings. And when your dignity is trampled upon the basic instinct is to re-assert and reclaim it.

The power and promise of dignity

“During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, my Lord, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”.

With those words Nelson Mandela concluded his three-hour opening statement during the famous, or is it infamous, Rivonia Trial on 20th April, 1964. His statement, **“It is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”** best captures the power of dignity and courage.

On 11th June 1964, at the conclusion of the trial, Mandela and seven others - Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymaond Mhalaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Andrew Mlangeni, Ahmed Kathrada and Denis Goldberg- were convicted. Mandela was found guilty on four charges of sabotage and like the others was sentenced to life imprisonment.

That propelled the struggle against apartheid to a new and higher level. International solidarity with South African liberation struggle intensified. It included the AACC Anti-apartheid program and WCC Program to Combat Racism. Twenty seven years later, in 1990 Mandela was released from prison, and in 1994 he became the first democratically elected president of a free South Africa.

Ten years before the Rivonia Trial another action motivated by power of dignity had occurred thousands of miles away from South Africa; but not in dissimilar circumstances. When Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat aboard a city bus on 1st December 1995 in Montgomery, Alabama, USA she acted with power of dignity and courage.

It was a rule of the segregation policies in the USA that African-Americans had to sit at the back of the bus and to move if a white bus rider asked for the seat. But this time, Mrs. Rosa Parks did not move. The police arrested her for this act of disobedience and resistance. The news reached Dr. Martin Luther King who determined that the most effective way in response was to fight back. On the morning of 5th December, 1955 the Montgomery bus strike started and the US Civil Rights Movement was born. The rest, as they say, is history!

Insights gained from acts with power of dignity

Moderator, brothers and sisters those two courageous actions by a man who came to be the foremost icon of liberation in the world and an ordinary woman in the USA give us several insights about human dignity.

Firstly, is that the power of dignity is real whenever and wherever people claim their right to life and insist that life in all its forms is sacred; that is to say, all of life is the gift of God and requires our deepest appreciation, respect and defense against any threat. It is the power of dignity that compels people to take risks in the struggle for justice for all. Respecting, restoring and reclaiming violated dignity is not a matter of concepts and not even an advocacy issue like others; it is about the core of people's lives and their livelihoods. Everything we say about rights-based approach, human rights and humanitarian action to protect people must be squarely placed in the context of these realities. It is here that concrete action for a life of dignity gives us reason to hope; and it is here that people take the courage to claim their dignity. The power of dignity inspires in us the courage to hope. And as Saint Paul teaches in Romans 5:3-5 suffering produces

perseverance; perseverance, character; character hope. And hope does not disappoint us.

Secondly, respecting human dignity is central to human rights. The very notion of human rights is grounded in the unalienable dignity of every human being irrespective of race, sex, religious affiliation or any other identity marker. This is clearly stated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In terms of the biblical tradition, the dignity of every human being has its origins in the very fact that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1). God pronounced all that is created as good and thus affirmed the inherent dignity and integrity of all life. By coming to redeem creation in human form, God re-affirmed and re-dignified the human being. Hence the courage that inspires and motivates the most ordinary people like Rosa Parks to take the most extraordinary action in defiance of the most powerful authority in the world!

Thirdly, human dignity in this biblical sense has a strong relational dimension. It is rooted in God the creator and realized in mutual respect and solidarity between human beings and in reverence for the integrity of creation. These relationships, however, are easily broken, as underlined by the stories of the fall and Cain's murder of Abel (Gen 3 and 4). The vulnerability of human beings is exposed if their dignity is not respected. In concrete life, therefore, the starting point for all advocacy for human rights has to be the experience of the vulnerability of human beings under conditions of injustice. Poverty, like other forms of marginalization, is first of all the consequence of different forms of injustice and lack of entitlements. This is further aggravated through unequal and asymmetrical distribution of power in its different forms.

Consequently, ecumenical witness for human dignity and the integrity of creation has centered around empowering people for justice and human rights, building their capacity, and equipping them to confront injustice. People are intended to be subjects of transformation who follow their own aspirations for a meaningful life, and not recipients of aid, or silent bystanders as advocacy is undertaken on behalf of them closer to the powers.

Fourthly, it is essential for religious communities and churches that undertake advocacy on behalf of the victims, to be in constant touch and in solidarity with the victims themselves. Ecumenical advocacy efforts should be geared to accompany and sustain the people in their struggles. There is a certain tendency to focus on advocacy initiatives in the corridors of power as if it were the powerful states, influential politicians and business leaders who have to bring about change. But we should never forget that they are the ones who have benefited from the existing injustices in the first place. The civil rights movement and many other initiatives of social movements have proven that policies and practices of the powerful and dominant forces change only when this call is backed and supported by vibrant and strong movements of people on the ground engaged in the struggle for justice and affirmation of human dignity.

Restoration of dignity of the African peoples in the 21st century

Moderator, brothers and sisters I am convinced beyond any doubt that the quest to recover and reclaim the dignity of the African peoples should constitute one of the biggest challenges in the 21st Century. The essence of the African vocation is the affirmation and restoration of human dignity for all of our people. The suffering and misery experienced today by people of African descent on the mother continent and in diaspora is an invitation to awaken in the hearts and minds of her people the possibility of a new life that is rich and fulfilling. If the African people are made aware of the alternatives, Africa shall not endure in the solitude of misery, neither shall she be eternally banished without hope. The spirit of God will enable Africa to discern messages of hope even through walls of hopelessness. This spirit will direct the people towards a new vision of life that can purify the past and bring new life to the enslaving forms of global migration such as being experienced by those risking everything to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe and Sinai Desert to Israel in search of better life.

By rejecting externally imposed solutions to her problems, Africa will provide a fresh look at the world as the means to restoration of a healthy, unifying vision and of dignity to her people. And the history of Pan-African movement best demonstrates this fact. When Africans from the Americas, Caribbean, Europe and the mother continent gathered in Manchester, England in 1945 for the 5th Pan African Congress and dared to dream and believe that Africa can and shall be free, they discerned a vision: they committed themselves to struggle for political, economic and spiritual emancipation of Africa. Armed with that vision, yes with that vision only, and not with guns and bomb, they resolved to leave Europe and cross the Mediterranean Sea into Africa to start what led to the independence of Ghana in 1957 and that of other countries in the successive years. That is why liberators like Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Padmore, W.E.B du Bois would turn in their graves in the knowledge that more than seventy years later the reverse is true: Africans are crossing over to Europe to escape poverty from which they ought to have been liberated scores of years ago.

The emancipation envisaged by the Pan Africans' vision has at its centre the human dignity; its foci is both material and spiritual. Hence the person's dignity and worth is not derived only from level of education, position and material wealth. Rather, it is derived most importantly from the right relationship with other human beings, the rest of the creation and the Creator. That is why it is important that we lay the ethical foundation of human identity in our discourse regarding human dignity. For the African people, the relational dimension is accorded the highest value in measuring the quality of life in the community and the society at large. This relational dimension was greatly undermined and compromised by slavery, colonialism and apartheid; and it needs to be recovered and reconstructed. While political emancipation is a great achievement on the way to recovering the violated dignity of the Africans, there is still a lot to be done if we are to lay the claim that the ordinary African today does indeed live a life of dignity. We know all too well that Africans are among the victims of modern slavery.

But then we know also that we are not innocent victims any more. Truth be told, Africans today disrespect, violate and

undermine the dignity of their brothers and sisters. You only have to look from Cairo to Cape Town and from Asmara to Freetown. What do you see?

70 years since the Pan Africanist vision for liberating the violated African dignity

- Xenophobic violence in South Africa, brother against brother, sister against sister.

- 70 years later the dignity of girls and women in the DRC is violated with abandon; brother against sister.

- 70 years later, the dignity of the ordinary South Sudanese is trampled on the ground by the presumed liberators following the longest bloodiest liberation struggle in the world; brother against brother.

- 70 years later the madness now is Alshabab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria puts to shame the colonial atrocities; brother against brother, takes sister, mother

- 70 years later even in peaceful Kenya the daily papers remind you of increasing pedophile and defilement of indescribable forms.

- 70 years later the deepening poverty undermines the dignity of majority of the African people. The ecumenical community must feel called to admonish the 10% embarrassing rich to live a little more simply so that the abject poor may simply live.

And today we witness a new social phenomenon where clergy, both genuine and self-styled are increasingly exploring their unsuspecting and faithful worshippers ushering in a new form of disrespecting the dignity of the African people.

In the diaspora, we witness that 63 years since Rosa Parks defied the super powerful American authority by asserting her dignity, it has become necessary to remind humanity that black lives matter.

Brothers and sisters the list is too long for our brief presentation.

Communitarian ethic: African gift to humanity

It is not Africa alone that faces challenges related to violated dignity. Humanity in general has to contend with such challenges. In that respect, Africa has a lot to offer to the rest of the world; foremost of which is the notion of communitarian ethic. The communitarian ethic of the inter-relatedness of life as a gift of creation is at the heart of Africa's contribution to modern civilization. In most of the African belief and value systems, all human beings subsist in a moral universe. It is a universe sustained by a web of relationships connecting the distant past, mediated by the present, as the future happens. The moral culture of palaver and story-telling is the means by which the past becomes verbalized in the present, giving value to daily experiences of life through memories of days long gone by. We need to reconstruct the essential elements that contribute to the nurturing of a communitarian ethic. These include an integrity of wholeness – whole person, whole life, and whole relations within the whole community. This challenges us to move from our alienated state to a state of wholeness and reconciliation, to move

from alienation in regard to one's culture and community to wholeness.

From the point of view of communitarian ethic, all members are obliged to share and contribute to the growth of life of the whole community. To guard the common welfare of the community is the responsibility, first of all, of the community leaders. Yet, the people as a whole are co-responsible because the capacity of the leaders essentially depends on every single community member. Between the leaders and ordinary members, there exists a dialectical relationship. The academics in the community are challenged to be active members in the life of the community, allowing their intellectual resources to interact constructively with real situations on the ground. African intellectuals must strive to be organic intellectuals fully integrated into the life of the community and putting their gifts and talents at the disposal of the community. That way, the intellectuals, civic leaders and community members reinforce one another through the whole body, the community.

A communitarian ethic consistent with human dignity calls for deep remembering, a task requiring new schools of thought, new moral courage and new ways of learning from each other within, across and between our communities. It calls for new and creative ways and forms of sharing that written deliberately transcends accustomed patterns of academic exchange and social interactions and seek to share life with life. It calls for new critical consciousness, as well as new interpretative skills and methods. Above all, it calls us to look at the 21st century with new eyes. It challenges us to form the new generation of African youth equipped to build our communities in which rights, justice and dignity will characterize the lives of our people in each and in all places. That is why it is the great task of All African Conference of Churches and other communitarian agencies to engage in the search for theological and moral paradigms for sustenance of life with dignity lived in sustainable communities.

Abundant life, modernity and cultural renaissance

Cultural renaissance is a vital element to the recovery of the dignity of the African peoples. In the African world everything can be brought back to the concept of life. An important dimension in this vein is the reconstruction of religious values that ensure abundant life for all in the community. Such religious values include caring for the more vulnerable in the community, i.e., the elderly, the sick, the children; mutuality wherein we invoke the African adage, “I am because we are and since we are therefore I am”. That is what **Ubuntu** teaches us; being each other’s keeper in the sense of upholding one another in times of need, and mutual uplifting for more rejuvenation. The goal of reconstruction of such values is to promote and struggle for sustenance of life, protection of life, enhancement of life and enrichment of life (i.e. life in all its wholeness).

The dominant themes of modernity, especially those linked to astonishing developments in technology, raise critical questions with regard to human dignity. The issues at stake with respect to the apparent triumph of modern technology must be engaged contextually. There are certain existential dimensions of human experience that cannot be fully grasped or articulated through the use of technology. One may dare to contend that there are certain features of modern technology that reflect lingering aspects of the incompleteness and emptiness of human beings. Yet one cannot speak of a form of technology which displaces spirituality, even though there are forms that enhance the hedonistic tendencies of human nature.

This quest for equality is deeply rooted in human dignity. It calls for great sacrifices and selflessness. The ethic of life is connected by grace with that which connects people to their ancestry, existence and preeminence. Land, trees, birds, air, sea, fish, sunshine, stars, moon, human beings and even insects are part of the generosity that life bequeaths upon us all. All these subsist on the ground of being, as signified by the land from which no human being should be alienated. Human and peoples’ rights are therefore to be based on an ethic of accountability rather than impunity; inclusiveness rather than exclusion; participation rather than manipulation; dialogue and consensus–

building (learned from African traditional values) rather than domination; solidarity rather than survival of the fittest; sufficiency rather than greed; equality rather than exploitation; liberty rather than captivity; and caring for life rather than destruction of life.

Unless and until the human dignity of every individual person is affirmed, respected and upheld, the democracy we are trying to build in Africa will be hopelessly truncated. In a capitalist economy, to be is to have money; indeed, you become an even higher being because you consume. From the African traditional point of view however, the individuality of a person, as created by God, is all that matters to be valued for one's relations with others. One's dignity and worth is not, therefore, incumbent upon one's monetary wealth.

Conclusion

The AACC has worked with the understanding of justice in its advocacy efforts within the framework of African Union (AU) and individual governments. In the context of growing inequality, concentration of power, social exclusion and ecological destruction, people are longing for life with dignity. To promote life in dignity in just and sustainable communities, churches need to be witnesses to the word of God that is "living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword....." (Hebrews 4:12).

AACC's choice of the theme of the 11th General Assembly could not have been more morally apt and politically relevant. From this assembly's findings, AACC should send a message to African leaders calling upon them to lead with dignity. Leading with dignity means that the leaders are aware of the emotional volatility of those experiencing an assault to one's worth; it would require leaders to demonstrate what it looks like to treat others, especially the least of them, as if they matter. It would require them to know how to treat people who have been violated and what steps to take when they themselves have violated those they lead. It is only when African political leaders lead with dignity

that we will honour the spirit and letter of Pan-African vision. And that is a debt we owe to our political ancestors who in the words of Mandela, life in dignity is an ideal for which to live and, if needs be, for which to die. And there is no better place from which to start such a journey than here in Kigali, Rwanda whose efforts at the restoration of human dignity following the 1994 genocide is nothing but absolutely remarkable.

Thank you and God bless you. God bless Africa!