

## BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

- Topic: Solidarity with Africa: Theological Perspectives and Challenges  
Convener: Bryan Massingale, Saint Francis Seminary  
Moderator: Bradford Hinze, Marquette University  
Presenters: Michael A. Perry, United States Catholic Conference of Bishops  
Paulius I. Odozor, University of Notre Dame  
Margaret Pfeil, University of Notre Dame  
Jamie T. Phelps, Xavier University of Louisiana

This year's gathering of the Black Catholic Theology session turned its attention to the theological importance and challenge of Africa. The impetus for this topic was twofold: (1) the publication in the fall of 2001 of the U.S. Bishops' document, *A Call to Solidarity with Africa*, which received scant attention in aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001; and (2) a two-part conference convened in the fall of 2003 at Notre Dame University and in January 2004 at various sites in Nigeria, entitled "A Call to Solidarity with Africa." The aim of the latter series of conferences was to bring together academics, policy makers, activists, and people of faith to discuss Africa, the challenges it faces and the promise it holds for the human family.

Michael Perry, African Affairs Policy Advisor for the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, provided some background to and reflection on the 2001 Conference statement. He related that the document's genesis stemmed from a growing recognition of Africa's critical role in the life of the universal Church, in geopolitics, and in the ongoing historical experience of the United States. Other factors that placed Africa in the consciousness of the Catholic bishops of the United States were their struggles against apartheid, collaboration with African leaders on international debt relief during the Jubilee year, presence during the Special Synod for Africa in 1994, and numerous recent visits to Africa. Of special significance in bringing Africa to the attention of the U.S. Conference of Bishops has been the emergency assistance and development work of Catholic Relief Services, which provided a concrete mechanism for developing strategic partnerships and ongoing relationships between Catholics in the United States and Africa. Perry also spoke of how various crises that beset the African continent, especially the AIDS pandemic, have spurred a sense of urgency among U.S. Catholics concerning the needs of Africa's peoples. Yet the statement attempts to balance the reality of Africa's needs with an awareness of the continent's cultural wealth. Perry concluded by noting that the aim of the statement was both to convey and develop a sense of solidarity and commitment between the Church in the United States and in Africa.

Paulinus Odozor spoke of the genesis and rationale for the Notre Dame and Nigerian Conferences of 2003 and 2004. In brief, the goals of the dual conferences were: to raise the profile of Africa in the U.S. church and university campuses; to increase an understanding of Africa's promises and challenges; and

to marshal a collaboration between the intellectual resources within Africa and the U.S. academy for the sake of life on the continent. Odozor summarized what these conferences identified as being the most pressing issues that affect Africa's future: international debt relief; health concerns, especially HIV/AIDS and malaria; the coexistence of Christianity and Islam; and the reality of lingering ethnic hatreds. Odozor concluded his remarks by noting that Western theologians still do not yet appreciate the fundamental theological shift that has occurred "whereby the Southern continents have become the heartlands of the Christian faith." Taking this shift seriously, he believes, would necessitate a "Copernican revolution in theological discourse."

Margaret Pfeil contributed a reflection on the challenge that Africa poses for theological reflection in the United States. Pfeil participated in the Notre Dame and Nigeria conferences. Structuring her reflection around the concept of "solidarity," she noted that taking Africa and its reality seriously in theological reflection entails raising the questions, "What enslaves the U.S. church at this time? What in our society begs for transformation?" As a concrete example, Pfeil spoke of the militarism with which the U.S. is complicit through its role as the world's top-selling arms dealer and how this hinders efforts at developing alternative forms of conflict resolution on the African continent. Solidarity, she maintains, challenges the U.S. and African churches to speak more prophetically on behalf of life in the face of policy choices that lead to death. She concluded her contribution by observing that the option for the poor was a theme that was hardly addressed in the two conferences, and then illustrated its importance for challenging the reality of clericalism and promoting interreligious dialogue in the African context.

Jamie Phelps offered a critical theological analysis of the USCCB statement. She noted that the document is an excellent sociological overview of Africa's richness and challenges. Yet, she observed that it does not read Africa's social context through the lens of the theological, biblical, and ecclesial traditions of the church. It points to—but does not articulate adequately—an ecclesiology of communion, a theology of discipleship, or the Church's social teachings that form the basis for the U.S. Christian's concern for Africa's peoples. The paucity of theological reflection in such an official document caused Phelps to wonder how theologians and bishops could work together more effectively in their common ministry of transforming church and society.

The subsequent spirited discussion among the session's fifty-seven attendees testifies to the richness and timeliness of this topic, and demands that Africa receive further attention in future sessions of the CTSA.

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