

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY CONSULTATION

Topic: The Sacramental Imagination—African Appropriation of Catholicism
Convener: Shawnee Marie Daniel-Sykes, Mount Mary College
Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union
Presenter: Elochukwu Uzukwu, Duquesne University

Elochukwu Uzukwu, the Rev. Pierre Schouver, C.S.Sp. Endowed Chair in Mission, provided dynamic insight into the African sacramental imagination that was released by the Second Vatican Council in his paper, “The Sacramental Imagination—African Appropriation of Catholicism Before and After Vatican II.” Uzukwu’s own words capture the insight best:

African Catholicism before and after the Council manifests imaginative creativity in the area of the sacramental life. But the period following Vatican II could correctly be called the “springtime of liturgy” in Africa. It was a period of excitement and enthusiasm, a period to make the Church-sacrament truly Christian and truly African. The creative liturgies that one encounters in Nairobi, Abidjan, Kinshasa or Lagos, emerge from the reception of the Catholic tradition, the memory of Jesus Christ transmitted by missionaries. This anamnesis is local and Catholic: rooted in the creative fusion of the Paschal Mystery with the “memorial of the ancestors.” The best example is the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire. But creativity is also captured in the celebration of Corpus Christi in Ghana and Nigeria; and it is captured across the continent in the lively celebrations of the Eucharistic liturgy and the liturgy of Christian initiation that display the church-sacrament, the real body of Christ.

The first part of Uzukwu’s presentation focused on the “vitality of sacramental practice in contemporary African Roman Catholic churches.” This was followed by the second part, a brief treatment of the Church in African communities prior to Vatican II. In the third and final part, Uzukwu cogently elaborated on the importance for Africa and the world Church of Vatican II.

Already in the first document of the Council, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Catholicism’s embrace of the vernacular was actually its embrace of the languages and cultures of the emergent “world church” as its own. Uzukwu explained further by noting that that SC explicitly refers to the fact that in some places, a more radical adaptation of the liturgy is needed. This was to be managed by the appropriate ecclesial authority. It was precisely this spirit that released the sacramental imagination of the African Church, thus truly integrating the African experience of life and benefiting the entire Church.

Whether describing a Swahili Mass in Nairobi, the significance of Kente and Adinkra art in Cote d’Ivoire, or the Latin Mass in Lagos, Uzukwu invited all present to experience dimensions of the African sacramental imagination. He spoke of the Swahili Mass in Nairobi where all present concelebrated and there were no spectators; referred to art forms that embodied African traditional religion being “drawn into the symphony of praise;” and explained the integration of Latin Mass parts together with English, Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo songs used for the Entrance Procession, Responsorial Psalm, Preparation of the Gifts, Communion, and Recession, all celebrated by choir and assembly with drum, swaying, and tapping to keep beat.

In the second part of the presentation, Uzukwu described the African Church before Vatican II as a struggling Church. At times the missionaries misunderstood and disparaged ceremonies, describing them as pagan. African leaders and subsequent missionaries internalized these negative estimations. As this ethos spread within the context of decolonization, it resulted

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in an African community that, at the time of the convocation of Vatican II in 1959, was characterized by a sense of alienation and schizophrenia.

The reforms of Vatican II nevertheless proceeded. In the third part of the presentation Uzukwu explained the “springtime of the liturgy” in Africa that spanned from the 1969 missal of Paul VI to the 1994 Synod of Bishops in Africa. This “springtime” was a fertile ground for liturgical creativity that celebrated and accented the unique customs and expressions of various African peoples. For Uzukwu, the witness of the vibrant African Church is an invitation for the Latin Church to continue to stretch its ecclesiological and sacramental imagination to truly celebrate unity in diversity.

A lively discussion followed this insightful presentation by Elochukwu Uzukwu, C.S.Sp.

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