

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Topic: Collaboration for Mission
Convener
and Moderator: M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College
Presenters: Jamie T. Phelps, Xavier University of Louisiana
Elochukwu Uzuku, Milltown Institute, Dublin, Ireland

Taking the notion of *communio* as a point of departure, papers by Jamie T. Phelps and Elochukwu Uzuku explored ministerial collaboration for mission in historical and contemporary social contexts. Both theologians developed descriptive accounts of the global situation derived from careful social analysis research; both foregrounded notions of inculturation, culture, and cultural diversity; both drew on pertinent encyclical letters and synodal documents in development of the notion of *communio*; both argued that collaborative ministry manifests the authentic nature of the church. Finally, by attending to the social, cultural, and religious experience of African-descended peoples, Phelps and Uzuku contributed to the Group's ongoing discussion of Black subjectivity.

Jamie Phelps began by presenting a schematic time line of (1) key historical events from the 16th through the 20th centuries in the social experience of African-descended people in the United States; (2) their political, economic, and cultural resistance and struggle in relation to those events; and (3) specifically African American Catholic strategies for engagement with broader African American cultural, with culturally diverse movements for resistance and struggle, and with the structures of the U. S. Catholic Church. The schematic offered a direct means of conveying the struggles of African American Catholics for communion and their resistance to segregation, even as it drew attention to breakdowns in ministry to African American Catholics.

Because of the lingering and pervasive impact of slavery, legalized segregation and discrimination, Phelps noted the difficulty of interpreting bishops from that era in light of the ecclesiological ideals of the Second Vatican Council. "While in some ways it is unfair," she stated, "to interpret the church in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras in light of a 20th century doctrine of church, it nevertheless proves instructive." Phelps traced the ways that ministry to Black Catholics was compromised and marginalized—the precarious cultural situation of the Church in 19th century Protestant America, the ministerial demands of European immigrants, the difficulty of conceiving of slavery as incompatible with the natural law, and the inability of the hierarchy to discuss seriously the evangelization of the newly emancipated peoples. At the same time, Phelps commended the effort of certain bishops to place discussion of ministry to Blacks on the agendas of the Second and Third Plenary Councils, to change their thinking on slavery, to seek out religious orders to minister to Black Catholics, and to support the emerging Black Catholic Congresses of the period. Phelps' paper disclosed the poignancy of broken 'communion' in the U. S. Church around race and in attempts to lead all members "with Christian dignity towards salvation."

Characterizing the evolving African context as "age of anxiety" and "age of confusion," Elochukwu Uzuku argued for "a redefinition of the self of the church

based on Golgotha as ‘ground zero.’” Such a redefinition, he stated, would help “to radically locate the church at the margin—the slums of Kibera (Nairobi) or Ajegunle (Lagos).” He specified the notion of ‘*communio*’ by describing the church as Family of God in the image of the Trinitarian Family; a church where communion in the form of sibling relationship imitates Trinitarian *perichoresis*.

To demonstrate the interpenetration of the social and religious (eschatological), Uzuku correlated the failure of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) forced upon African states by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to the rhetoric of “deliverance, salvation and prosperity” that is promulgated by African Initiated Churches (AICs) and that proves so attractive to youth. While the search for religious answers to political and economic problems is not restricted to the African Continent, the ministries of AICs and charismatic movements present an opportune moment for reflection.

The situation in the African context projects new needs, which give rise to new ministries, which ought to give rise to new ministers, who embody the ideal of collaboration and communion. Employing an Igbo aphorism, Uzuku asserted that the ideal of collaboration in ministry might be realized in a church that “drop[s] the ear on the ground to hear the cry of an ant.” Returning to the image of the church from ground zero, that is, from Golgotha, Uzuku understands this image as liberating and empowering the Spirit led community into freedom to assume its responsibility. Such a church not only engages in mystical contemplation of the Triune God but also in the radical transformation of social relations.

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