

## RESPONSE TO AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR'S "A GLOBAL SIGN OF OUTWARD GRACE: THE SACRAMENTALITY OF THE WORLD CHURCH IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION"

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Many years ago, I had the privilege of teaching Orobator as a visiting professor at our Jesuit School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya. How quickly the roles of teacher and student are reversed! Like the psalmist, Orobator in his recent book, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, invites us to "taste and see" the rich wisdom of African theology. Others have analyzed the ingredients of such theology; but he has truly offered us not a recipe but a feast.

When I first went to Africa, to the town of Tabora, Tanzania as a young Jesuit, I found myself charged with the care of young refugee children. Having just completed my language studies, and more naïve than noble, I thought I must simply love the children and all would be well. A fond illusion! For almost immediately, two of the boys began to fight, and as the fighting escalated, I knew I must intervene. To my chagrin, however, I could not remember the word for "stop." So I rushed into the house, found my large dictionary, looked up the Kiswahili for "stop," and with mounting apprehension, thought just how to put it in the imperative plural. I recognized then the hard grace that, as Dorothy Day says, quoting Fr. Zossima, "love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."<sup>1</sup>

It is "love in practice, as Orobator reminds us so eloquently today, that tutors our sacramental imagination. The sacraments effect what they signify; just as they signify what they effect, and it is this performative aspect of "the principle of sacramentality" that I wish to consider briefly in light of Orobator's profound and illuminating reflections. For, as Orobator urges, "proper performance is judged by the quality of our justice, depth of our mercy, and genuineness of our care, not as theological abstractions, but ethical imperatives." But how so? Is there not a puzzle here? For how is what is symbolically effected at the same time grasped as an imperative—an imperative bearing not only on moral theology, but ecology, and ecclesiology? Let me say a word about each.

In his book, *On Job*, Gustavo Gutierrez asks, how do we "speak of God in the midst of suffering?"<sup>2</sup> How do we speak of godly things to a crucified people? Our answer, at least in part, rests in the "flawed words and stubborn sounds" of sacramentality: that in the midst of this disenchanted world, replete with genocide, poverty, and casual slaughter, there remains, as Levinas says, a word of "prophetism" and hence of "revelation."<sup>3</sup> For sacraments signify, symbolically show forth, Christ's Crucified Body: the *imago Dei*. And what they effect is our incorporation into this Body: the first is given, the Word of crucified love; the second is the story

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Day, "Our Country Passes from Undeclared to Declared War; We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand," *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 264.

<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 13.

<sup>3</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1985), 113, 89. "The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill'. It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face" (89). For Levinas, "the Infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face signifies the Infinite" (105).

of our lives, received utterly as gift. Word becomes story, narrative under the sign of command: “You must change your life,” says Rilke.<sup>4</sup>

Only thus is the command of love, at the heart of Christian ethics, revealed as *Love’s* command, of grace commanding, and commanded as grace. In the midst of innocent suffering, to paraphrase Levinas, “the Infinite comes in the signifyingness” of the face of the Crucified: the *imago Dei* appears as command, enfleshing the imperative of covenant fidelity with a crucified people. In the words of Julius Nyerere, former President of Tanzania, “we say [we] are created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed, wretched—which is the lot of the majority of those...created in [God’s] image.”<sup>5</sup>

Camus once wrote that “life is not tragic merely because it is wretched.”<sup>6</sup> But the sacraments remind us that the suffering of our sisters and brothers *is* tragic; revealing, as in Mark’s Gospel, the story of love crucified because it is love. The sacraments fix our gaze on the silence of Calvary, the silence alone in which the Word is spoken—and they bid us speak with our lives, speak as the lives of the women who show the “‘face of redemption turned visibly’ toward the sick, the refugees, the poor.”

In words of Walter Benjamin, the sacraments show forth “the suffering and passion of the world;”<sup>7</sup> its tragedy redeemed in tragedy. And so the sacraments, in signifying the Crucified Body, bind us to the crucified people. As Chauvet argues, “without the return-gift of an *ethical* practice by which the subject ‘verifies’ what it has received in the sacrament, Christian identity would be stillborn.”<sup>8</sup>

And so too, as Orobator shows us, the sacraments bind us to the world. They are the consecration of the ordinary, the beauty bred of our bone and marrow. “At best, the principle of sacramentality affirms the sacredness of all creation and enables a ‘sacramental view of creation’—that God is in the world because God has pitched God’s tent in our midst.” Here Orobator recalls the wisdom of one of the great African philosophers, Engelbert Mveng. “The *human person*,” says Mveng, “is never a monad.” Indeed, “[t]he individual is not a person in the African understanding of the latter term; it is simply the projected outline of a person. The human being is defined as a person insofar as it is a network of interpersonal and cosmic relationships. It is the recapitulation of both the cosmos and humanity. Human beings are linked to each other and the world; they are an extension of both.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 147.

<sup>5</sup> Julius Nyerere, “The Church’s Role in Society,” in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, ed. John Parratt (London: SPCK, 1987), 117–28, at 119.

<sup>6</sup> Camus writes that “it is the failing of a certain literature to believe that life is tragic because it is wretched.” Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1977), 166. See Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991), 208. See Helmut Peukert, *Wissenschaftstheorie, Handlungstheorie, fundamentale Theologie* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1976), 278ff.

<sup>8</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbole et Sacrament: Un relecture sacramentelle de l’existence chretienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 288.

<sup>9</sup> Engelbert Mveng, S.J., “Black African Art as Cosmic Liturgy and Religious Language,” in *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 139. See Vincent Mulago’s observation that “The life of the individual...[can only be] grasped as it is shared. The member of the tribe, the clan, the family, knows that he does not live to himself, but within the

So it is, writes Mveng, “a *sacrament* is the cosmic manifestation of the incarnation. It is the Son of God turned into the *water* of Baptism, the *bread and wine* of the Eucharist, the *anointing* that consecrates, and *the words, gestures, and rites* that sanctify.” It is not, then, the world that explains the sacrament, in a speculative metaphysics of symbolic causality; rather it is the sacrament that reveals the world charged with “God’s grandeur”—in the midst of brokenness, a beauty that is never spent.<sup>10</sup>

Brewed in an African pot, such wisdom offers an aesthetic rapprochement of what Western epistemology has typically sundered: the imperatives of morality grounded in human dignity and derivative human rights, and those of ecology, opposing such anthropocentric bias. For in Mveng’s words, “Every human initiative effects fulfillment, insofar as the cosmos once again attains freedom and awareness...One is all the more a person insofar as one is integrated into the world and society.”<sup>11</sup> Here subjective transcendence is within nature and expressive of nature rather than instrumentally opposed to nature (e.g., as in Cartesian dualism of the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*).<sup>12</sup>

And finally, what the sacraments effect, by their very nature, is reconciliation, what Desmond Tutu speaks of as “the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships”—both ethical and ecological.<sup>13</sup> In a world riven by violence and uncivil strife, ravaged by HIV/AIDS, poverty, and environmental degradation, the sacraments bid us “imagine otherwise.” Incorporated into Christ’s crucified Body, our flesh becomes Word, bearing his “message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). God, Paul tells us, “reconciled the world in Christ,” and summons us to become “ministers of reconciliation” (2 Cor 18).

Here, too, the summons is given and must be received as gift; the Church must itself “first be reconciled” (Mt 5: 24) if it is to share the ministry of reconciliation. Indeed, the Church reveals God’s commanding grace, precisely as subject to God’s gracious command. The very Word reconciling us to the Body, reveals our sinfulness—failures of compassion and inclusion, especially of women. For these are the sins that beset us *as* Church, the intimate betrayal of ecclesial hybris, the arrogance and ignorance of a log that mistakes itself for a crocodile.

As Orobator tellingly reminds us, the sacraments are not holy things sequestered from the world, sacral objects jealously preserved by magisterial fiat, “policing the boundaries of form and matter.” No, the sacraments reveal the holiness of the world, the deep down grandeur of God, shining forth, even in our earthen vessels (2 Cor 4:7). For the Church to realize itself *as* sacrament, then, repentance is indispensable: “we entreat you on behalf of Christ, says Paul, “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20). Now reconciliation, I’ve argued, comprises three moments: we must name the evil done, for where there is no common sense of evil, there can be no re-

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community” (“Vital Participation,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. K. A. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1969), 139.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Karl Rahner’s interpretation of Christology as at once ascending and descending in “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 178–203.

<sup>13</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 51.

conciliation; we must seek systemic redress, redeeming the *cri de coeur* “never again;” and we must seek interpersonal redress, taking the victim’s side.<sup>14</sup>

Today, for our Church, the healing of breaches must begin with recognizing the scandal of pedophilia, a scandal systemically abetted by the abuse of episcopal power and failure of magisterial oversight. Still, I believe, for too many prelates, the harm remains the scandal rather than the scandal being the irreparable harm done to children. We must furthermore recognize the perduring social sin of a Church that fails to recognize the full gifts of women, excluding them “from sacramental ministry and leadership,” the scandal of the CDF’s investigation of the LCWR, the scandal of the recent notification of my mentor and friend Sr. Margaret Farley. “Church, where is your sister, where is your mother?” Or in Farley’s words, recalling John 14:9, “how long have I been with you, and still you do not know me.”

We must seek systemic redress, as Orobator has argued. We need, in the words of the African theologian, Elochukwu Uzukwu, a Church with “large ears,”<sup>15</sup> i.e., a Church that teaches just as it learns in discerning love from the *sensus fidelium*.<sup>16</sup> Above all, as Mercy Amba Oduyoye insists, we need “a good dose of women-inspired wisdom.”<sup>17</sup> We need not fear such learning nor retreat into a sectarian haven where moral wisdom is reduced to ritual purity. After all, is it not a saving irony that today our bishops march under the banner of religious liberty, defending a right that not so long ago they would have utterly repudiated? What Aquinas called the *magisterium cathedrae pastoralis* (magisterium of the bishops) and the *magisterium cathedrae magistralis* (the magisterium of theologians) must learn from one another if either is to teach effectively.<sup>18</sup> Certainly the ecclesiastical magisterium profited from the wisdom of John Courtney Murray, if not from the lesson of his life—that we need not silence our prophets to learn from them. Finally, we must seek interpersonal redress. We must take the victims’ side; and more, take it as our own; so that we not only “see and have compassion,” but compassion itself becomes our way of seeing (Lk 10: 33). Such compassion entails a primordial responsibility for the victim—a responsibility acknowledging the degree of our own complicity in their suffering, and the graced resolve to redress it.

Only a repentant Church can reconcile; only thus can it reclaim its prophetic heritage as “a global sign.” We must pray for the grace of prophetic humility: the humility to know that the Gospel we speak is not our own, we remain earthen vessels; but just so, our flawed words speak a word that is simply gift, and thus most truly our own, the Word as sacrament, signifying what it effects. So let us speak it humbly, but boldly. In Orobator’s words, let “the true church of Christ...be the learning and listening church—a church that is constantly, humbly, and self-

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<sup>14</sup> See William O’Neill, S.J., “Imagining Otherwise: The Ethics of Social Reconciliation,” *The Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002): 183–99.

<sup>15</sup> Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 127–30, et passim. The image is drawn from totem of the chief among the Manja of the Central African Republic.

<sup>16</sup> See Karl Rahner, “The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council,” *Theological Investigations* 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 716–27.

<sup>17</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Feminist Theology in an African Perspective,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 166–81, at 177.

<sup>18</sup> Aquinas, *Contra Impugnantes*, c.2; *Quaest. Quodlibet.*, III, q. 4, a. 9, ad 3; *In IV Sent.*, d. 19, q.2, a.3, qa.3, ad 4; see also International Theological Commission, “Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria,” *Origins* 87 (March 15, 2012).

critically attuned to what the Spirit is saying to the churches both in the global south and in the global north.”

Perhaps we members of the CTSA must learn not only to say “stop” to those who abuse authority in the name of preserving it. We must also learn words of grace and reconciliation, of wisdom brewed in an African pot. As Orobator concludes, “For the church as well, there are irrepressible signs of outward grace bestowed on our world.” Let us, then, pray for the grace of prophetic humility, of reconciliation and not recrimination. In words learned long ago from the prophet Jeremiah: “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope” (Jer 29: 11).