

HOW ARE THEOLOGIANs CHALLENGED AND INFORMED BY THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SENSE OF THE FAITHFUL IN THE LOCAL/GLOBAL CHURCH?

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Nairobi is one of Africa's most vibrant cities and the capital city of the country that loaned the word "safari" to the English lexicon. For hundreds of thousands of tourists who flock to Kenya's popular game reserves, national parks, and exotic resorts, the country is synonymous with happy animals on display in carefully managed habitats. As far as the eye of any visitor can see, high-rise office and residential apartment blocks sprout across Nairobi's downtown Central Business District like elephant grass while the riotous sounds of its chaotic traffic defy the logic of civilized commute. People who know and live in Nairobi are accustomed to navigating its contours by sight and by sound.

For visitors endowed with a keen sense of smell and who are not averse to a little bit of adventure, it is easy to detect another "Nairobi"—the Nairobi of the slums. A total of thirty-six slums ring the city like barricades of distressed human existence. I know one of them: it is called Kibera or Kibra. Home to an estimated one million slum dwellers, Kibera is a detritus of what Pope Francis calls "an economy of exclusion and inequality" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 5). Such is the legendary notoriety of Kibera that it is actually listed as a tourist attraction, a must-see item on a bucket list of "to do" in eastern Africa. Safaris are conducted to this dingy edge of human existence, where poverty presides unchallenged over the lives of countless women, men, and children.

What I find most remarkable about Kibera is the slum's singular capacity to assault all five human senses at once—the smell of putrid open sewers, the sight of naked hordes of children, the endless cacophony of energetic voices and activities, the acrid taste of dust mixed with charcoal, the unforgiving heat of the midday sun with hardly a tree shade for cover. This is Kibera, home to Josephine Opondo, Josephine Otieno, Fiona, Cynthia, Dinah, and Violet—six teenagers who I now consider my daughters.

Over the last couple of years, I have made a modest attempt to journey with these young women by offering a listening ear and a willing shoulder for them to lay down their cares and challenges. I strive to mentor them and instill in them a sense of confidence and hope in their potential to become women of conscience, compassion, and competence. They call me mother, obviously not in any biological sense, but as a woman who has freely chosen to birth in them positive alternatives to the closed existence imposed on them by the accident of their birth and life in Kibera. It is in this concrete sense that I concur with Leonardo Mercado's incisive observation that "the role of the theologian is to function as a midwife to the people as they give birth to a theology that is truly rooted in a culture and moment of history."¹

These young women and thousands of others who are quarantined in Kibera by poverty do not possess the benefit of a supernatural theological insight or spiritual instinct capable of receiving or rejecting, contesting or querying exalted magisterial

¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Faith and Culture*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 18–19.

teachings, as we usually like to define *sensus fidelium*. What they have are *senses* native to their context: *senses* that allow them to smell, taste, hear, feel, and see the action of the Spirit at work in their broken milieu. The truth of the faith that the magisterium proclaims and theologians discourse about is filtered through these *senses*. Like most women of color whom I have come to know and in whose lives I have become engaged, the experience to which their *senses* bear witness is one of pain and exclusion, manifested in multiple forms of injustice and abuse, including domestic rape, gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, limited access to education, and poor sanitation, maternal and child health.

Through the lives of these women, I have made a fundamental discovery that *sensus fidelium* is not a concept to be understood in the singular. *Sensus* is not mere insight or instinct affirming or rejecting a truth minted in abstract and extraneous context; *sensus fidelium* represents a *plurality of senses* of the people of God by which they perceive and live the reality of their faith, vocation, and ministry. In the best tradition of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, *sensus fidelium* calls for an application and discernment of the senses.²

For this reason, I consider inadequate the customary approach to the question of *sensus fidelium* from the perspective of a trichotomy that distinguishes and separates faithful, hierarchy, and theologians. In this hierarchical construct, relevance and influence either increases or decreases as a function of the position of a particular group or category within this unequal relationship. Credit goes to the architects of Vatican II for attempting to dismantle this skewed relationship: first, simply by recovering for the church its original theological self-understanding as the people, the faithful, the communion or the body of the Risen Christ, ahead of functional differentiations of roles and tasks; and, second, by insisting on the irreplaceable character of the faithful in their local context for an authentic understanding of the world church. Many are the theologians who have truly understood this dynamic dialect of the local and the global. Robert Schreiter conceptualized it as “glocality”; Stephen Bevans rendered it as “contextuality”; theologians of the global south create it as inculturation; and liberation theologians prioritize it as “praxis.”

In my ongoing quest for theological authenticity and relevance I have discovered Kibera not as a place but as a metaphor for the intriguing reality called *sensus fidei* or *sensus fidelium*. However we chose to define or understand it, the sense of the faithful is filtered through the senses of the context or condition of people of God. Even Pope Francis has recently acknowledged the vital importance of the olfactory organs in the evangelizing mission of the church as the community of the people of God, for a true shepherd must “take on the ‘smell of the sheep’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24).

Thus, drawing on my experience in Kibera, I now understand that to be challenged and informed by the *senses* of the faithful is to get “involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives...” to embrace “human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others...[S]tanding by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24).³

If we believe in the centrality of the principle of *sensus fidelium*, as a charism of the Spirit, we affirm also the communality of the faith and the shared responsibility

² International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” §83.

³ *Ibid.*, §127.

we bear for witnessing to, celebrating, and elaborating this faith as gift and task. In this optic, the faithful, no matter how well-flattered, are not a category apart—fictionalized or reified matter for theological disquisition or hierarchical patronization. If we had more open forums of synodality, consultation, communication, and conversation at various levels of church life and governance, from Rome to the slums of Kibera—where hierarchy, theologians, and laity can exercise their shared responsibility for the function of ecclesial magisterium as integral rather than episodic dimension of the church—we would be engaging practically with the senses of the faithful in our local church and in the world church.

Engaging the *sensus fidelium* is as much a mental shift as a spatial relocation. I confess that the theology in which I have been schooled in the academy over the last decade leaves little or no room for engaging the *sensus fidelium* as a lived reality, that is, one that is not merely outsourced to or monopolized by a specialized group of academicians and ecclesiastics. To engage with the senses of the faithful is to effect a radical pairing of discourse with action, and to my knowledge few are the theologians within this sorority and fraternity that successfully achieve such blending of “word and deed,” creating thereby a theology brewed in the gritty reality of human life. Few are the theologians who seek to be part of the solution, practically, thinking globally but acting locally one step at a time.

Consequently, as to the “how” of engaging the *sensus fidelium*, I propose as a methodological approach of listening-in-dialogue. Integral to this process is consultation, conversation, and respect for difference. In Africa we say that when you listen carefully you can hear a crab cough. If we engage with the senses of the people of God and allow ourselves and our theologizing to be immersed in their reality, we can hear more distinctly what the Spirit is saying to the church through their laments and narratives, and we can appreciate more profoundly their struggles against the multitude of evils that traumatize them. We become in this way, Elochukwu Uzukwu’s “listening church,” rather than patrons, patronesses, and purveyors of a distilled theology, too concentrated for local consumption, yet prized for its inebriating effect on its elite corps of members-only theologians. What I propose, then, is an art, not a technique.

As I have stated earlier on, Kibera is a metaphor, a medium for recognizing and engaging the senses of the faithful, or what the International Theological Commission aptly refers to as “the school of the *sensus fidelium*.”⁴ There are other metaphors and media. Listening and engaging the senses of the faithful happen when—like Kristin Heyer and Daniel Groody—we theologize at the frontiers and borders that separate kith and kin from the privileges of developed nations. Listening and engagement happen when—like Bryan Massingale and Shawn Copeland—we deconstruct the foundations of centuries-old racial inequality and injustice. Listening and engagement happen when—like Elizabeth Johnson, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Linda Hogan, Teresa Okure, Margaret Farley, Lisa Sowle-Cahill, to name but a few—we expose the ideological fanaticism that wreaks havoc on women and our bodies in church and society under the guise of practicing and preserving the traditions of the fathers. Listening and engagement happens when, following the lead of Brad Hinze, we

⁴ Ibid., §§81–82.

practice a form of theological communication that is inclusive of all voices, no matter how different from or how strange they may sound to our cultural biases.

To listen to and engage the senses of the faithful is to strive to create and empower local networks capable of harnessing the wisdom of the local church in order to enrich the theological, doctrinal, and evangelical profile of the global ecclesial community. I mean by this cross-cultural networks, such as those initiated by Jim Keenan, David Hollenbach, Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Stan Chu Ilo, and others, aiming to redefine how we do theology, giving voice to colleagues, and pressing for inclusivity at the table of mutuality.

Furthermore, listening and engagement of the senses of the faithful occur when theologians of the Catholic Theological Society of America, in solidarity with the oppressed, speak out against a macabre culture of targeted killing of unarmed black men in a country that prides itself as the most powerful nation on the globe.

I could continue this inventory of engagement with the senses of the faithful, but the point is clear; both in our local churches and in the world church, as theologians, we need well-developed, complete, and attuned set of senses to discern the truth of the faith that theology seeks to understand—in and around us, in our locale, for the edification of the global community of the faithful. The truth, which the church's hierarchy and official magisterium oftentimes grudgingly predicate of the people of God, requires more than mere comprehension by the intellect; it requires living enactment. It embodies a reality filtered through multiple senses.⁵

To conclude this brief presentation, in my relatively short lifespan as a theologian, three key issues have taken on greater significance, first, for an accurate understanding of the senses of the faithful; and second, for a deeper appreciation of the true sense of the local church.

Women. Women. Women. To speak out of my local African-Nigerian context, women are the church. It is that simple. Although centuries of doctrinal aberration and ecclesiastical abuse of power have actively conspired to undermine our dignity and limit our participation in the local church and world church, the resilience of African women in acts of charity and worship, ritual and celebration, service and compassion, validates the monumental claim of Pope Francis that women—as modelled in the person, faith, and ministry of Mary—are “more important than the bishops” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 104). Nowhere would this declaration be truer than in the church in sub-Saharan Africa. On this issue I want to underline the position that *sensus fidelium* is not an instinct or a privatized intuition; it is not static reproduction of tradition; it is not conformity for the sake of unity; it is a communion in mutuality, a praxis of subsidiarity and inclusion. As women we constantly point up the disvalue of such lack of ecclesial inclusion locally and globally. In this context, and in this church that boldly and confidently honors the senses of the faith, Bishop Libby Lane would be an African Catholic woman; naming women to the International Theological Commission would be routine not token; and leadership would be exercised as a function of the combination of charism and competence, call and compassion, not a by-product of gender, race, status, power, or privilege.

Authority. Authority. Authority. A sacramentally and hierarchically stratified *ecclesia* commands the faithful to show subservience, loyalty, and obedience. This

⁵ *Ibid.*, §39.

practice is the direct antithesis of the principle of *sensus fidelium*. We have historical and contemporary contested questions in theological ethics and institutional leadership that illustrate the virulence of this command-and-control exercise of authority in the church. Yet, if we are to engage the senses of the faithful authentically, such senses, intuition, or wisdom ought to be recognized, valued, and received as active expression of the evangelizing and teaching mission of the church as the people of God. In this light, over and above all else, to engage the *senses of the faithful* amounts to a rediscovery of the *imago Dei*—that inalienable and supernatural gift conferred on every baptized Christian and sustained by the creative Spirit of the risen Christ (see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12). It is anything but a privilege selectively conferred by the authoritative teaching of the church. *Sensus fidelium* is an affirmation of the points of divergence and convergence around the multiple dimensions and expressions of the faith in the one communion of Christ.

Theologians. Theologians. Theologians. As theologians we are constantly tempted by the lure of academia. The very notion of *sensus fidelium* locates the source of our research and scholarship in the practiced wisdom of the community of the people of God. In line with what I have consistently maintained, to do theology, therefore, requires that we see ourselves first as learners—women and men learning from those we seek to teach and recognizing their role as legitimate stewards of the word of God and custodians of the apostolic traditions (see *Dei Verbum*, no. 10). To borrow the terms of Jean-Marie Roger Tillard, we are practitioners of communion in a manner that is symbiotic, mutually respectful, and compassionately in solidarity with those voices relegated to the margins of social, political, ecclesial, and economic insignificance. To learn is to recognize *sensus fidelium* as a theological source or *locus theologicus*.⁶

Back to the question. “How are theologians challenged and informed by their engagement with the sense of the faithful in the local and global church?” I can only speak for myself. Much of my research has engaged with issues concerning African women in both the diaspora as well as women with whom I am in contact in various African settings, in particular my six daughters in Kibera. Because I am an African-Nigerian woman, I acknowledge my own identities: first, as an African Black and, then, as a Black woman. I approach the issues through these lenses. My heart responds to the pain and struggles of women as expressed in their lives. I strive to listen to voices from the margins, orient myself toward the unappealing frontiers of the human condition, and prioritize deeds of justice, mercy, and compassion mandated by the Risen Christ—and these over-and-above desiccated notions of truth and tradition that are oftentimes the prized possession of a self-centered ecclesiastical hierarchy. This theological option to listen to the senses of the faithful has convinced me that the binary proposition of reception and rejection of church teaching—that developed over a long period in theology—does not exhaust the deepest meaning of *sensus fidelium*.⁷ I believe that what I have identified as the senses of the faithful constitutes a source of theological truth; the senses of the faithful represent a teaching authority, too, inspired by the Spirit of the Risen Christ, in our local churches and in the world church.⁸

⁶ Ibid., §81.

⁷ Ibid., ch. 2.

⁸ Ibid., §74.

Plenary Session: How are Theologians Challenged and Informed by the Sense of the Faithful?

In prayerful conclusion, dear colleagues, may the senses of the people of God *prophetically* speak to us, challenge us, inform us, teach us, and call us forth.