

CONSULTATION ON BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Topic: Popular Religiosity and the *Sensus Fidelium*
Conveners: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union
Moderator: Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary University
Presenters: M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College
SimonMary Asese Aihikhai, Loyola Marymount University

The CTSA's Consultation on Black Catholic Theology and the Consultation on Hispanic Latino/a Theology engaged in an intentional collaborative and participative effort across sessions. The administrative teams of each consultation met to develop a cohesive response to this year's theme of the *Sensus Fidelium*. The sessions' collaborative titles were *Popular Religiosity and the Sensus Fidelium*. Session one met on Friday morning, June 12th. Unfortunately, the representative from the Consultation on Hispanic Latino/a Theology was unable to be present for this year's the panel presentations.

M. Shawn Copeland's paper, "Cultural Memory, Geography, and Aesthetics: Engaging the *Sensus Fidelium*," began by drawing on the notion of heuristics as suggested by Bernard Lonergan to suggest that culture denotes a set of meaning and values that inform a way of life. From that notation she offered that collective cultural memory, which emerges from a field of common and complimentary experiences and is enriched by diverse expressions of these expectations. These collective cultural memories constitute *a people as they are*. Collective cultural memory socializes; most of what human beings learn about how to operate in the world, they learn from others. On the other hand, when collective cultural memory is lost and it becomes indifferent, cultural and collective memory may be fragmented or damaged. In this way, sometimes whole peoples forget or choose not to remember, sometimes they will themselves not forget, and sometimes they are coerced not to remember. Still memory is not only disinterested, it is fallible and malleable. An example of this view that memory is not disinterested but is fallible and malleable is found in what Copeland illustrated as the *Commemoration of Ancestors as An African Diasporic Practice*.

Through the use of powerpoint slides, Copeland discussed the ritual practice of the *Commemoration of the Ancestors* as done annually at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana. It brings together Roman Catholic and Bakongo Culture as it regards a solemn necrology of those men and women, boys and girls, who have died. Through this ritual practice of the *Commemoration of the Ancestors* the *sensus fidelium* is made manifest.

Next, SimonMary Asese Aihikhai spoke about the *sensus fidelium*, asking the audience to journey with him, an African Catholic theologian. He discussed those Catholics in the African diaspora who attended the 2000 Archdiocesan Synod in Los Angeles, California. Black Catholics were mixed together and charged with speaking to the African-American Catholic experience in this particular archdiocese. Aihikhai noted the paradoxes and challenges that surfaced, mainly due to the diversity of experiences, thought, reflections, history of colonization, etc., of those who fall under the umbrella group called black. For example, African Americans, African-Europeans, Caribbeans, and Africans all fall under the umbrella of black. To

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further emphasize these challenges, he shared various types of literary genre to illuminate the complexities of this synodal task. For example, drawing on the novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, Africans in the diaspora weep because they have lost their sense of who they are as a people; their mindsets have been destroyed which prevent many from seeing in themselves the dignity of their being; they have become pilgrims rejected and scattered over the land. Despite this destructive history, they can still speak as Africans, particularly as they relate to the ancestors and ancestresses who live in and through our collective memories. The ancestors and ancestresses silently guide the people, or the *sensus fidelium*, as they daily balance the sacred and the profane. In this balance, for Ahiokhai, Mother Africa will soon find her children and hold them to her bosom in a way both will recognize each other as the prodigal son is recognized by the Father in the Christian Scriptures.

These two presentations were followed by a lively question and answer period, for example, concerning the ongoing use and development of the commemoration of the ancestor ritual at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies. Epistemological questions were raised as they relate to collective memory, the *sensus fidelium*, and those in the African diaspora.

SHAWNEE M. DANIELS-SYKES
Mount Mary University
Milwaukee, Wisconsin