

CONSULTATION ON BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Session Topic: Debt and Life, Justice and Mercy  
Convener: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana  
Moderator: C. Vanessa White, Catholic Theological Union  
Presenter: John Segun Odeyemi, Duquesne University  
Respondent: SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai, Valparaiso University

The Black Catholic Theology Consultation group convened a session to focus on the theme “Debt and Life, Justice and Mercy” through a paper presentation along with a formal response. A paper titled “‘Justice and Mercy’: Breaking New Grounds in the Question of Discordancy: A Case Study in the Development of Doctrine in African Catholicism” was presented by John Segun Odeyemi in which he explores the issue of discordancy linked with the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the African continent. Relying on Pope Francis’ hermeneutics of mercy, Odeyemi argues that making a definitive doctrinal statement permitting the use of condoms for discordant sacramentally married couples, even if on a temporary basis, is not only just but also helps to present an image of a church that extends the hands of God’s mercy to those who are truly *anawim*—the poor of the earth. Odeyemi calls attention to the current statistics on HIV/AIDS infections globally. Developing nations, particularly in Africa, still account for most of those infected with the disease. To reverse this trend, he argues for a consistent engagement with ways to resolve the crisis facing Africa. He bemoans the lack of directives from the Roman Catholic Church’s magisterium on how to address the crisis faced by discordant couples. The church has to respond to this crisis by locating itself within the context of the people. The church, he argues, cannot maintain silence interspaced by off-the-cuff remarks, and disjointed, uncoordinated statements about questions that affect people at the deepest parts of their being and existence. In the light of the pontificate of Pope Francis and his call to a jubilee year of mercy, the church has to lead this march of mercy and justice. Making a case for discordant couples and stating an official position clearly is one of the ways in which mercy can be pursued within the broad framework of human sexuality.

In his response titled “Grounded in Mercy: Embracing a Practical Theological Response to the Reality of HIV/AIDS Sero-Discordancy,” SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai argued for a theological response to the HIV/AIDS crisis that is contextual and addresses the realities experienced by the local church. Appropriating the theological view on communion of churches, he defends a contextual approach that helps to bring about the flourishing of the people of God located in the particular churches. The experiences, pain and suffering, and hopes of discordant couples are those of the entire people of God. While the universal church attempts to address this issue, the primary responsibility lies within the jurisdiction of the local church and its magisterium. To achieve this, Ahiokhai calls for the appropriation of a practical approach that embodies God’s mercy. He evaluates the current theological reasoning behind the public statements of the episcopal conferences of Africa and Madagascar that fails to account for the realities of discordant couples. Rather than restate the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church magisterium on the use of contraceptives, a legitimate case can be made by the African episcopal conferences

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for the use of contraceptives as an “interim ethic,” until a definitive solution is achieved.

A very engaging discussion followed after the presentation and response. Members of the audience called attention to the need to address issues dealing with same sex relations and how a practical theological response can help broaden the conversation. The discussion shifted to the document from the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar titled, *Common Declaration of the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar* that was released in 2015, which Aihokhai called into question for its failure to embrace the positive aspects of the Maputo Protocol of the African Union on its treatment of the broad issues dealing with sexuality and identity in Africa.

SIMONMARY ASESE AIHOKHAI  
*Valparaiso University*  
*Valparaiso, Indiana*