

Experiencing Uncommon Faithfulness: Narrative Ecclesiology as Challenge and Promise

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It was raining lightly when we started. I looked into another protestor's eyes at the instruction of organizers, committing to each other's wellbeing in the demonstration we were undertaking. "What does the IHS on your mask stand for?" my partner asked. I told her that it stood for the name of Jesus. She carried an umbrella with the names of Black women and men recently killed by police. "I like your umbrella," I offered. The march began. Walking between brownstones in the South End, demonstrators chanted "Liar, liar, gentrifier! Black people used to live here!" over and over. I felt the pavement beneath my feet. I smelled the incense at an altar for Breonna Taylor. I closed my eyes and breathed in the centering exercises along the way. A pick-up truck blared music; people danced. We chanted and yelled. I wondered about church, and churches, and reasons people gather. I noticed that the organizers—self-described Black women, femmes and non-binary individuals—spoke about trauma, advocacy, and community. Protestors stood in lines 6 feet apart to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. A small piece of string in my hand connected me to my line. The world has not loved the people gathered here, I thought. They have learned to love themselves. I thought again of church; always of church.

This paper begins with a story and proposes that it is in the stories of the people of God that we will find the new directions and new life we so desperately seek as a church. Each

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generation surely faces its own challenges. Nevertheless, the first decades of the 21st century have seemed unique in their relentlessness, testing the capacity of the church to respond with a credible witness to the Gospel. Sexual abuse and its cover-up, advancing climate change, persistent systemic racism, and most recently the global COVID-19 pandemic have forced the church once again to seek resources from its tradition to apply to the problems of our time. Our present moment calls forth courage. Among many possible responses, a methodological shift in ecclesiology is necessary for us to move forward in theological reflection and action as church.

This paper will proceed in three parts. First, drawing on the work of Natalia Imperatori-Lee, I will articulate the meaning and benefits of a narrative ecclesiology. Second, I will present a case study of the American Catholic Church through the lens of narrative ecclesiology, highlighting the grave error of white Catholics in failing to attend to the experience of Black believers, and the faith and resilience of Black Catholics in spite of their marginalization in church and society. Finally, I will attempt to answer the question: where do we go from here? The suffering of our world requires more from followers of Jesus than comfortable promises of prayer or religious witnesses within insulated social spaces. The church must come to know the stories of the people of God, especially the oppressed, so that they may become a true source of ecclesiological reflection. For this to happen, embodied human beings must meaningfully encounter the reality of a world which suffers, and listen closely to what they hear.

Part I: Narrative ecclesiology

In order to understand the meaning and relevance of the narrative ecclesiology proposed here, it will be helpful to paint a picture of the landscape within which this particular

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methodology arises. Natalia Imperatori-Lee suggests a contrast between “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to ecclesiology.¹ “Too often,” Imperatori-Lee notes, “ecclesiologists focus on grand unifying metanarratives of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, leaving details of how that church functions in the lives of the people of God as an afterthought.”² Here we see a suggestion of the sources or “realities” of ecclesiological reflection which Imperatori-Lee perceives existing in a dynamic tension: “ecclesiological doctrines about unity or apostolicity, about the structure and mission and ministries in the church *ad intra* and *ad extra*” on the one hand, and “the praxis of Christians, the lives of the people of God” on the other.³ While creative tension often characterizes the relationship between these theological sources, Imperatori-Lee is clear to point out that the choice is not either-or. Instead, “the challenge for the ecclesiologist is to weave together these two realities.”⁴ Contrasting top-down and bottom-up ecclesiology, then, is not so much a question of choosing one set of sources over another, but rather of deciding which source will be given pride of place. Looking at the history of the church, we might ask where the emphasis in ecclesiological method has been in a given time and place.

Recognizing that any Catholic ecclesiology must hold together doctrinal commitments and the stories of God’s people, narrative ecclesiology is unapologetic in its emphasis on the lives of the people of God. In this sense, we might say that narrative ecclesiology is a corrective opportunity. Specifically, it is an opportunity to come to know God who ceaselessly acts in the lives of persons and communities. In encountering the stories of the people of God, both mundane and extraordinary, we discover a rich and privileged theological source—one largely

¹ Here I follow the work of Natalia Imperatori-Lee closely. See Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 134-158.

² Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 134.

³ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 136-137.

⁴ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 137.

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untapped in the history of the church. Narrative ecclesiology means “a turn to experience... in order to systematize the story of God’s people.”⁵ Following the lead of Vatican II, and especially in the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, Imperatori-Lee proposes “selecting a few particular stories, telling them honestly, and allowing them to spark ecclesiological insight and inform ecclesiological doctrine.”⁶ A bottom-up approach to the study of the church “takes seriously the insights of the laity, particularly the silenced and marginalized.”⁷

Narrative ecclesiology presents two main benefits for the purposes of this paper. First, as suggested above, the bottom-up method proposed by Imperatori-Lee safeguards against “the tendency to construct metanarratives that derive from abstract ecclesiological principles.”⁸ No one is exempt from the temptation of ideologies which reinforce the interests of the powerful, not even the church.⁹ By beginning with the reality of the marginalized, we are prevented from constructing false histories which obscure the facts of both human sin and divine grace.¹⁰ The second benefit of narrative ecclesiology is the way that “particular personal stories” attune the church to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world, working both within and beyond existent church structures to sustain the lives of the oppressed.¹¹ Said another way, by focusing our attention on the stories of the silenced and outcast, we are gifted once again with the revelation of a God who is bigger, braver, more creative and inspiring than our smaller visions had enabled us to see. With this brief summary of narrative ecclesiology and its benefits, we move on to a case study of the American Catholic Church.

⁵ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 135.

⁶ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 135.

⁷ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 135.

⁸ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 147.

⁹ See Johann Baptist Metz, “On the Way to a Postidealist Theology,” in *A Passion for God*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 30-53. See pp. 34-39 for a treatment of the relationship of knowledge to interest from a Christian theological perspective.

¹⁰ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 147-148.

¹¹ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 135.

Part II: A case study of the American Catholic Church

The history of Black Catholics in the United States offers crucial insight into both the opportunities of narrative ecclesiology and the consequences of its absence. Roman Catholics of African descent have been present in what is now the continental United States since as early as 1565.¹² Despite this longstanding presence—over 200 years prior to the formation of the first official American Catholic diocese—the cries for freedom of Black Catholics during the times of slavery and Jim Crow segregation went unheard, their profound witness unseen, within the institutional church, among theologians, and among white Catholics. Instead, the risks attendant to top-down ecclesiological reflection are clear in the theologies that developed to justify the exploitation of enslaved Africans. M. Shawn Copeland, for example, traces a particular line of deductive reasoning which combined color symbolism with a certain Christian anthropology to sanction slavery.¹³ “Black flesh was devalued ontologically,” she writes, “and greater value was placed on the ‘spiritual and transcendental.’”¹⁴ Other common methods of justifying the enslavement of African-Americans included arguments from Scripture in order to show biblical precedent for slavery.¹⁵ Augustin Verot, bishop of Savannah, drew from sources as varied as Romans 8 (“Let every soul be subject to higher powers”), Genesis 14, and elsewhere to offer such an argument in his *Tract for the Times*, a pro-slavery homily turned pamphlet in 1861.¹⁶

¹² Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., “God of Our Weary Years: Black Catholics in American Catholic History,” in *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, eds. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 17-46. See especially his discussion on p. 20.

¹³ M. Shawn Copeland, “White Supremacy and Anti-Black Logics in the Making of U.S. Catholicism,” in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, eds. Vincent Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 61-74. See p. 66-67.

¹⁴ Copeland, “White Supremacy,” 66. She is quoting Eulalio Baltazar’s *The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 27.

¹⁵ Augustin Verot, *A Tract for the Times: Slavery & Abolitionism Being the Substance of a Sermon, Preached in the Church of St. Augustine, Florida, on the 4th day of January, 1861, Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer* (New Orleans: Catholic Propagator Office, 1861), 11-12, 16.

¹⁶ Verot, *A Tract*, 5-7, for example.

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Armed with theological rationales, the Catholic Church explicitly participated in slaveholding society in the name of social acceptance, especially in the South.¹⁷ Enslavement, torture, terrorism, lynching, and rape were the reality of African-American members of the body of Christ for the first *centuries* of United States history. What might church leaders and theologians have known, had they given their attention to the lives of Black Catholics? What theological, psychological, and institutional mechanisms permitted such a dramatic bifurcation of principle and narrative?

In spite of the dehumanization and neglect of white Catholic laity, theologians, and clergy, the Holy Spirit was at work in the lives of Black Catholics, empowering lives of “uncommon faithfulness.”¹⁸ Whereas above we saw the devastating consequences of excluding experience from theological reflection, in the stories of the marginalized the possibilities of narrative ecclesiology become apparent. By attending to the concrete experiences of those marginalized by systems of power and the ideologies which justify them, we discover that the Holy Spirit leads and guides the church in surprising ways. The life of the church is more expansive than we know *until* we look to our collective stories—past and present. A few examples are suggestive here. Where the institution of slavery and the scourge of the Civil War left a group of Black Catholics in South Carolina without any formal support, the lay-led community of “Catholic Hill” persisted for 40 years without “priest, church, or sacraments.”¹⁹ Two American orders of Black religious women were founded during the time of slavery, against enormous persecution, and ministered to the needs of the Black community through schools, orphanages, and other pastoral ministries.²⁰ In the face of limited clerical support, Black

¹⁷ Copeland, “White Supremacy,” 71.

¹⁸ Copeland, “White Supremacy,” 72.

¹⁹ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 209-210.

²⁰ Davis, “God of Our Weary Years,” 29.

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Catholics pioneered lay-led movements such as the National Black Catholic Congress (NBCC) in the late 1800s. The NBCC made “social justice the center of their ecclesiology,” embodying a prophetic charism uncommon in their time.²¹ As Cyprian Davis notes,

The history of the Catholic Church in the United States is not merely the story of an ecclesiastical institution implicated in the slavery system...it is the revelation of a universal and inclusive church that flourished among Blacks and that generated a much richer Catholicism. This richer Catholicism can be termed a black response to a white Catholic world.²²

This is the story of God’s people which must be systematized, in all of its complexity. The opportunity presented by narrative ecclesiology is precisely this: when we draw close to the stories of the silenced, we come to know the reality of the church in our world, and we come to know God’s fidelity and love more deeply.

Part III: Where do we go from here?

The history of Black Catholics in the United States suggests that our ecclesiological approach has not always balanced Christian doctrine with Christian praxis. On the contrary, we have struggled to attend to the experience of the church’s many members—especially its socially and theologically marginalized—for as long as there have been Catholics in the United States. While I have focused my attention on African-American Catholics within this paper, similar analyses yield parallel insights of theological obstacles and responses of uncommon faithfulness in the stories of women, Latinx Catholics, LGBTQ believers, and many more. Where do we go from here? I propose that narrative ecclesiology provides an important insight into the answers we seek: we must sit at the feet of the faithful, listening to particular stories, especially where pain and suffering are present. I offer two suggestions, drawing on the past and the present.

²¹ Davis, “God of Our Weary Years,” 34-38.

²² Davis, “God of Our Weary Years,” 26.

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First, we must honestly reckon with “dangerous memories,”²³ and “unforgiving realities”²⁴ of our past. Notably, this includes Catholic complicity in the institution of slavery. Georgetown University’s Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation process is a promising example of this kind of reckoning in the Catholic context.²⁵ We often lack the “tools” as individuals and communities to do such hard work, which is both emotional and psychological in nature. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore our history. We must open ourselves to the blessing and burden of past choices, trusting that God will provide what we need as a church to do the work that is required. What might it be like for Catholic parishes in the United States to study the life of Father Augustus Tolton, the first visible Black Catholic priest in the US, or Mother Mary Lange, founder of the Oblate Sisters of Providence? This is an attainable goal for personal and communal undertaking which would surely bear fruit for ecclesiological reflection and devotion alike.

Second, I believe that we must cultivate embodied experiences of solidarity with communities that struggle for liberation today. The last decade in the United States has seen renewed attention to the persistent racial bias faced by people of color, especially within the policing and criminal justice systems. Womanist theologian Eboni Marshall Turman draws incisive connections between the origins of the Black Church in the time of slavery and “the emerging ecclesiology of the contemporary movement for Black lives,”²⁶ yet notes the significant opposition of both white and Black Christian churches to Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter movement, Turman observes, while not “Christologically confessional” is

²³ Imperatori-Lee, *Cuéntame*, 147.

²⁴ Eboni Marshall Turman, “The Holy Spirit and the Black Church Tradition: Womanist Considerations,” in *The Holy Spirit and the Church: Ecumenical Reflections with a Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Thomas Hughson, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 99-112. This quotation is taken from p. 104.

²⁵ See “Georgetown University: Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation,” Georgetown University, accessed December 22, 2020, <http://slavery.georgetown.edu/>.

²⁶ Turman, “The Holy Spirit,” 100-101.

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“Christologically praxeological in ways that put the [Church] to shame.”²⁷ What is it that prevents so many white Catholics, and the church as a whole, from explicitly engaging in the contemporary struggle for Black lives? In the three months between May 26—the day after George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis—and August 22, at least 7,750 demonstration events associated with the Black Lives Matter movement took place in cities across the US.²⁸ The invitation to a bottom-up ecclesiology which takes the lives of the people of God seriously exists today just as it did in the times of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. In order to engage in the kind of narrative ecclesiology called for by this paper, members of the church must first be present, with our bodies, in the same struggle as all those who are members of Christ’s own body. When the church engages the concrete reality of those who suffer, we hear the stories which must shape our theological reflection, we discover the Holy Spirit accompanying the faithful in history, and we find our response to the challenges of our moment awaiting us.

²⁷ Turman, “The Holy Spirit,” 109.

²⁸ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, “US Crisis Monitor Releases Full Data for Summer 2020,” accessed December 22, 2020, https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ACLED_US-Crisis-Monitor-Summer-2020_Overview.pdf.