
ETHNICITY - THE GRAVITATIONAL CENTRE OF EVANGELIZATION

AN ESSAY IN AFRICAN ECCLESIOLOGY

Deusdedit Nkurunziza*

*Makerere University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Religious Studies, P.O. Box 7062, Kampala,
Uganda*

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Abstract

The paper covers into an acknowledged language a large area of theological preoccupations, while in the context of Science & Theology it gives a view from the perspective of the relation between ethnicity and ecumenism.

Keywords: Church, sacraments, unity in diversity, symbol, ethnicity

1. Introduction

The church is the sacrament of union with God and unity among all people [1]. The Nature of the Church is understood with specific reference to Christ. In fact, the Church understands herself as a community of believers constituted by Jesus Christ himself as a result of his mission, life, death and resurrection. Consequently, the Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ.

“In that body the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe and who, through the sacraments, are united in the hidden and real way to Christ in his passion and glorification” [1, chapter 1/7].

The Church is the visible sign of the Risen Lord and prolongation of his mission on earth. The Church continues the symbolic function of the Logos in the world. Through the Church, the Risen and Glorified Lord continue to be the lasting instrument of salvation, and grace conferred within the terms of human intercommunication.

The living Lord who is invisible to us is made present to us in our earthly and historical world under sacramental symbols historically situated in Christ's Church. The church is the place where we experience the vital dynamic encounter with the God of our salvation.

* e-mail: dnkurunziza@hotmail.com

This paper is an attempt to understand this reality of the church within the gravitational centre of African spiritually and religious consciousness. The fundamental focus, the mainspring and centre of African – family spirituality is life [2, 3].

Life in the African family context is lived and experience in the organic universe and epitomized within the family relationship [4, 5]. From the African perspectives of life and family, this paper presents a vital-dynamic experience of the church as sacramental encounter of those united in faith of the Risen Lord. The paper, goes on to discuss as the gravitational centre of evangelization, fundamental to African Systematic Ecclesiology, and therefore, indispensable for the church in Africa.

2. The Church in the context of the African Organic Universe

Since Africa is a home of varied cultures, various conceptions of the universe must also exist, however, most African people conceive the universe as ‘an organic whole’ – one dynamic organic universe. This organic universe however, has two dimensions, the visible and the invisible [6-8].

Within the invisible dimensions, there is God, who is the Supreme-Vital-Force, who is the source and Life-Giver, creator from whom all other vital forces flow and are under his control. Then in the descending order come the founder-ancestors, the spirits of the clan heroes, then the deceased parents and relations [2, p. 161; 9; 10].

This visible aspect of the organic universe, which is the world of our experience, constitutes also its own hierarchy. It has other vital forces of the living, which form a hierarchy according to their power-vital dynamism; according to the different manner of being, distinguished by their mode and degree of participation in the Supreme Vital Force (God) and in superior forces of other spiritual/sacred spiritual forces. The visible world is a Symbolic manifestation of the invisible world [7, p.41].

Man-woman have a privileged place in this visible organic universe, they are at the apex of the cosmos. The cosmos, which is the inexhaustible source of life, is meant to reinforce the vital-dynamism of man-woman so as to make them more living. “...man is not merely a passive element in the rhythm of nature... He participates in the mysterious force which keeps the universe going. He is not just a parasite living in the surface of the earth: he is inserted into the ontological dimension of a world which dominates him but also feeds and sustains him.” [9, p. 110]

The family is a micro-cosmic universe of its own type, with the ancestors, family heads and the ordinary family members. The animals, plants and inanimate created things are regarded as part of the total existence of those to whom they belong. The centre of gravity around which this organic universe rotates is life [9, p. 120; 10].

The unifying factor, that holds together both invisible and visible, the nerve that holds all things together is life, the vital union, which transcends the merely visible and biological and reaches out to the invisible world [11].

The basic African concept associated with life is that of symbol [6, p. 53; 12] – ‘sacrament’. Contemporary theology tries to explain the casualty of the sacraments in terms of the symbol. Karl Rahner says: “The teaching on the sacraments is the classic place in which a theology of the symbol is put forward in general in Catholic theology. The sacraments make concrete and actual, for the life of the individual, the symbolic reality of the church as the primary sacrament and therefore constitute at once, in keeping with the nature of this church a symbolic reality. Thus the sacraments are expressly described in theology as ‘sacred signs’ of God’s grace that is as, ‘symbols’, an expression which occurs expressly in this context. The basic axioms of sacramental theology are well known: *Sacramenta efficiunt quod significant et significant quod efficient.*” [13]

Through symbol contact is made with the invisible power and also through symbol the duality between the visible and invisible, the spiritual and material, the sacred and secular is overcome. Through symbol there is vital union of all, there is vital participation.

Symbols not only unify the objects they symbolize, but also are believed to participate somehow in the reality which they express. The world is an ensemble of symbols and a message to be interpreted. The initiated is the one who knows the secret-symbols- of things and events. Through symbol, there is ‘collegiality’ between the invisible and visible. Through symbolic expressions the African lives his/her life in an intrinsic relationship with the creator. On this point the African is in agreement with Karl Rahner, when he says:

“The principle that God’s salvific action on man, from its first foundations to its completion, always takes place in such a way that God himself is the reality of salvation, because it is given to man and grasped by him in the symbol, which does not represent an absent and merely promised reality but exhibits this reality as something present, by means of the symbol formed by it.” [13, p. 245]

Within this symbolic relationship between the invisible and visible, the spiritual and material, the African searches to live his/her life. One of the basic experiences of the African in his/her symbolic organic universe is the continual search for ‘life in fullness’. The living one, want to live more, want to prolong life. The individual in relation to the community is searching for concrete existence accompanied by vital functions and good things of life – and integration with one’s own family and with the cosmos [14].

This African Symbolic experience of searching for fullness of life, life connections, vital union, which is also the basis of cohesion and unity of individuals in the African family finds its ultimate significance and a sublime and transcendental realization in the church of Christ; which is a community of life, and of which the vital principle is a participation in the life of the Trinity,

whereby God provides the supreme example of mutual participation and communion.

The church of Christ therefore, is the existential and transcendental realization of the African's intrinsic search and *primordial-longing-experience-of-life-in-communion*. From the African experience of life, one can agree with Kasper, that the Church as the sacramentally founded, universal communion is the surpassing answer to the question of man, *a zoon politikon*, a social organism dependent materially, spiritually and culturally on others [15].

3. The church is sacrament of life and vital union

The essence of life, in African context, as Mulago has already pointed out is vital union. Life constitutes a communion, one with the other. Such communion survives death, and links the living and their dead ancestors, who are the intermediaries between the living and God, the ultimate source of all life.

Humans can exist only in community and for the community; they need vital-dynamism to exist and that is what the Church – the family of God, the visible symbolic presence of the crucified Risen Lord, stands for and communicates. The Church, the family of God, to be worthy of its name and mission in Africa, *has to be the symbol, the primary sacrament that signifies and communicates life and vital union*; that is celebrating and communicating that very life which is God in himself. In this sense, the Church in the African context is the icon of the Trinity; it is the symbol of the eternal communion of the triune of God. In this theological context, the Church is seen to be a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit [1, chapter 1/4]. In the church the individual is taken up into the Trinitarian community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Hence the wish and the desire of the African People to belong to the Church because through the Church, the symbol of life and vital union, they share in the very life of the Family of God, Himself.

The Church, as the symbol of life and vital union in African context, has a two fold function, corresponding to the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' dimensions of religion. It has to be the dynamic link with God, the ultimate source of life and at the same time to be the dynamic link between man/woman and his/her fellow human beings and the world of things-the environment.

The Church as the sacrament of a life and vital union is therefore neither exclusively for corporal life nor exclusively spiritual life. In the foot steps of its master, it has to stand for life in the totality of its being, life in its full integrity. Consequently, the Church as sacrament of life and vital union, communities *that what it is by its very essence*, namely 'fullness of life' (John 10.14). The Church, the symbol of life and vital union in Africa, is super empirical, it is eschatological, it stands in for fullness of life here and now and fullness of life beyond the grave as these are inseparable and interdependent.

The eschatological thirst of the African to participate in and to communicate with greater vital-forces finds its fulfilment in the Church; the family of fullness of life because it is the family of God per excellence. The Church, therefore should be made a place to feel at home, that is the place of sacramental encounter between visible and invisible, between spiritual and material, between the living and their ancestors and ultimately between God and man/woman of our time. The challenge here is to experience the Church as 'communion'. This *communio*, however, does not come from below; it is a grace and a gift, common participation in the one vital-dynamic union of one life, in which God, the Life-Giver, through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, has mediated to us through word and sacrament, which we celebrate and share in the liturgy. Ultimately, the vital dynamic experience of church as sacrament of life and vital-union comes to the fore in the liturgy. The Liturgy is the privileged place for experiencing the Church as a vital dynamic sacrament of *communio*.

"By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the church. Lastly, he is present when the church prays and sings, for he has promised 'where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them' (Mathew 18.20)" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, chapter 1/7) [16, 17].

The Church's liturgy is a meeting place with Jesus Christ. The presence of Jesus Christ in the Liturgy is a vital dynamic event; it is a divine-human encounter through signs and symbols through which both the individual and community are made partakers in the divine *communio*.

In the Liturgy the Church is lived and experienced as the Body of Christ, the family of God which is vitalized by word and sacrament into a dynamic vital union of believers among one another. This vital union of believers (Christians) is concretely actualized in the communion of the local churches founded through the celebration of the Eucharist [1, chapter 3/23]. Within the local churches (dioceses) the individual Christian experiences and encounters the Church primarily in the parish community and ultimately in the small Christian communities.

Small Christian communities are authentic places where one can concretely experience the Church as symbol and sacrament of life and vital union: in bearing witness of faith (*myrtyria*), in the liturgy that finds its climax in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist (*Leiturgia*), and in charitable service to one another in the various attributions of human life (*diakonia*).

This vital-dynamic experience of the church as a sacrament of life and a vital union, that is a communion in unity is a basis for a legitimate African ecclesiology founded on life and communion an ecclesiology of multiplicity of local churches within the greater unity in the one faith, one baptism, one Lord with the same sacraments and offices contextualized in the different cultures and life-situations.

4. The Sacraments as dynamic symbols of life and vital union

I have already pointed out how symbol is a basic concept in African experience of life. Through symbol, there is vital union of all, there is vital participation between the spiritual and material world. Through symbol contact is made with the invisible life-power. The African traditional spirituality which is characterised by various symbolic expressions, through which they had contact with the spirit-world and the deity, finds its full expression in the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. The sacraments are Theo-Pneuma-Christ which unite the two dimensions of the African organic universe, the visible and the invisible. Through the celebration of the sacraments we are in the spirit, we have access to the Father through Christ, in order to become participants in the divine family. Through the celebration of the sacraments we live and share in a life experience of the Church as sacrament, we participate in the Trinitarian communion itself. All sacraments are symbols of life and provide vital encounter with Christ in the Church, this encounter takes place above all in the word and in the Eucharist. They communicate life and power; they are therefore, vital dynamic expressions of vital-union between God and humanity in history. They perpetuate the presence, the Life-power of the crucified Risen Lord in human history and at the same time bring about that efficacious personal-vital-union between the individual and Jesus Christ.

While these sacraments have counterpart rituals in African traditional life, they now communicate something fundamentally and radically new to humanity, 'fullness of life' – the indestructible life-relationship and communion with God. I believe this is what traditional Catholic sacramental theology calls 'Sacramental character'. For example, Ignatius of Antioch calls the Eucharist the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, the food that makes us live forever in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 20.2). In the celebration and reception of the Eucharist we experience an already present salvation: Christ is life and power for us and therefore the antidote for overcoming life disappointments and death by opening the gate to eternal life.

In the current African existential context of life where there is struggling to overcome suffering, poverty and death, the celebration of the Eucharist present a unique moment to experience the summit of all human life. In the Eucharist, one encounters in the most intimate way the resurrected Lord of life who gives the ultimate meaning to human life: to live in community with Jesus Christ, to be with him already in this life, participating in the ancestral community with the triune God and all the ancestors.

5. African communion foundation of an African ecclesiology of unity in diversity

The greatest challenge that faces the Church in Africa is unity in diversity. Given the present African situation, with a variety of peoples, histories and cultures, the Church as sacrament of life and vital-union must also be seen to be the symbol of unity.

Unity is a fundamental determination of the essence of the Church. The Church is essentially, *Una Sancta, Catholica et apostolica ecclesia* (*one, holy, catholic and apostolic church*) in which all the differences of peoples, cultures, races, classes, and sexes are ultimately encountered. On a Continent torn apart by violence, the Church as symbol of life and vital union has the challenge to witness to the transcultural equality and unity of all people, the unity of different ethnic groups and ultimately the unity of the *conditio humana*. Hence the Church in Africa can and must be experienced as a vital dynamic sacrament, which is as a symbol and instrument for harmony unity and peace in the world of our experience. It is then, that the church can be concretely experience as a universal sign of salvation [1, chapter 2/9].

The challenge of the Church in Africa is not only unity, but also unity in diversity. The Church has to demonstrate not only how unity in diversity is possible but also how variety and diversity may become a blessing. Africa needs urgently a communion-ecclesiology of unity in diversity to sustain a spirituality of concentric ecclesial communities that are not closed into themselves but pneumatologically open to the others.

“In other words, it should pick up the traditional African communal principles, enhance them with the goodness of Jesus Christ, and enable caring communities to develop and thrive”. [18]

The sharing community and solidarity of the Africa family should find its full expression and meaning in the sharing-worshipping-community of the Church. In this African context, there is need of an African communion-ecclesiology with ecumenical and inter-religious perspectives. An ecclesiology which recognizes the fact that in some of our villages, Africans of all three religions: traditional region, Christianity and Islam are untied by their extended family ties. An ecclesiology that takes into account the fact that Africa’s culture is communal and its spirituality and peace depends on inter religious existence. This means, in practice that dialogue with other faith communities is not an option but an imperative, an ecclesial duty for effective evangelization.

The ecclesial communities (small Christian communities) should become ‘sacramental’ that is, places where people not only talk but also live and experience justice, peace, and sharing. Places where the Good News of Jesus Christ is not only preached but also lived in the concrete of the real lives of the people to whom it is delivered and should make a difference.

The African sense of community founded on the family, clan and tribe has sometimes been labelled as 'tribalism' and as 'ethnocentrism'. There is apparent fear to meet and talk together as members of one ethnic group as such venture both in Church or government circles may be called 'tribalistic' or 'ethnocentric'.

There is of course no doubt that both the Church leaders and politicians have used ethnic differences for divisive and negative uses. The ecclesiological challenge remains, namely unity in diversity. In fact, it is my contention, that African ecclesiology of unity in diversity is the only source of salvation and liberation of different African ethnic groups. The ecclesiology of unity in diversity which encourages reciprocity, learning of and from each other and sharing the experiences of faith lived concretely in different cultural and ethnic life situations.

The Church in Africa has no alternative but to take seriously the demands and challenges of the different African ethnic groups. Rather than trying to suppress them, they should be re-vitalized by the Gospel so that they become part and parcel of the mystical Body of Christ, new concentric centres of evangelization and use their Christianized cultural aspirations as authentic moments towards internalized cultural evangelization.

6. Ethnicity - the new gravitational centre of evangelization

Shorter has already pointed out that ethnicity is a real problem for the Church in Africa:

"It would be surprising if the Church were not both a victim and accomplice of ethnocentrism. Up till now, Catholics have been reticent about the ways in which they have been affected by the "ethnic diseases Church authorities approaches the ethnic problem with extreme caution, creating ethnically encapsulated dioceses, and aligning with ethnically oriented governments. Even so, it was not always possible to avoid appointing bishops and priests who were ethnic groups. In the 1960s Catholic in a Ghananian diocese burnt their bishop's Episcopal throne outside the cathedral, because he was not of their ethnic group. In a number of other African dioceses the clergy have boycotted their newly appointed bishop and in other cases missionary administrators have been appointed because of incurable ethnic rivalries among the diocesan clergy." [19]

In the same context, Shorter goes on to point out how both the African Synod and SECAM have noted that the ethnic group remains the source of the very African social and cultural identity, which the Church is pledged to evangelize. Mary N. Getui goes a step further, to point out positive aspect of ethnicity and to emphasize how ethnicity can be utilized and applied today in promoting interethnic reconciliation and coexistence [20].

The power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates (Catechesi Tradendae no. 53). This means that every ethnic group needs to be transformed by the Gospel values in the light of the Paschal Mystery (Ecclesia in Africa No. 61). In other words, the challenge of the church in Africa is the evangelization and Christianization of the ethos of ethnicity (Evangelii Nuntiandi No. 20). This is the task which the Church in Africa has to carry out, and eventually to recognize and give identify to each ethnic group, fully knowing that he one who has the capacity to make the whole creation new (Revelation 21.5) is the very same one who *transforms and regenerates ethnicity to make his Body, the Church a multiethnic communion of Christian communities*.

In this regenerated and acculturated ecclesial communion there is nothing wrong when each ethnic group develops liturgy in their language and ask ministers from the same ethnic affiliation, such is the only authentic way towards self propagating, self-supporting and self-sustaining local Church. In principle therefore, there is nothing theologically wrong for each ethnic group to have its own liturgy and pastoral agents of their culture, of course not exclusively but primarily; otherwise the community is not self-sustaining but dependent on expatriates.

Pope Paul VI's message in Kampala 1969 to the Church in Africa exactly thirty seven years ago, is clear; '*by now you Africans must become missionaries to yourselves*' of course in the name of Catholicity and Universality of the Church, the Africans are free to blackmail and reject their fellow Africans in favour of expatriates; just as much as they are also free to remain dependent on foreign aid and personnel, but such does not facilitate the new integral evangelization of the African Church through the variety of its ethnical and cultural dimensions. If you want to sweep the house clean, you should get the bloom that can reach all the corners. The point I have tried to make here is that ethnicity can be used by the church in Africa as the gravitational centre of evangelization.

"In each parish, it might be advisable to promote occasions of encounter of different ethnic groups through celebrations..... it is important not to ignore the multi-ethnicity of Christian communities and to take the initiatives of presenting occasions to offer in the different groups, particularly the youth, and encourage them to share and appreciate each other's peculiarities". [21]

If we can infiltrate this ethnic variance in its indigenous African setting with the Gospel – Civilization of love, with the person and love of Christ, then this variance can be regenerated and stimulated to open up to the newness of the Gospel's truth and to find in it an incentive for further development (Fides et ratio no. 71). Otherwise, a continued refusal or dismissal of things African or rejection of genuine requests from different African sectors of life is not only a disrespect to the humanity of Africans but also a contradiction to the teaching of the magisterial which has already underlined that Christ in his Body in Africa is African. Pope John Paul II has supported the move towards enculturation in the churches of Africa and during one of these visits to Africa, has said that Christ in the members of his Body in Africa is African.

7. The church dynamic symbol of communion with the ancestors

Christ did not come to abolish family relationships but rather to sanctify them and by his Holy Spirit to enable them embrace and live in non-consanguineous and universal life relationships.

The ancestorship of Christ opens up the ghetto-mentality of the natural lineage's and unites them all in a common vital-union kinship system of the family of God. In this sense, the Church – the family of God is the place of encounter of the different African family systems as a consequence of acknowledging Christ's ancestorship. Jesus Christ is the epitome of all communion between God and humanity.

The ancestorship of Christ embraces the whole human family, and humanity has only one ancestor, one head, one Lord to speak on its behalf, that is the Christ, God-man. Those who have explicitly acknowledged the ancestorship of Christ and have become members of his family, the Church, are meant to be the proto-type of that union of life and love which Christ has with the Father in the Holy Spirit in which the whole of human kind is called to participate.

The Church, therefore as a community of communities, the family of families, the clan of clans, living and experiencing a vital dynamic bond of union of faith, love and fellowship in Jesus Christ is the symbol of communion with the ancestors. The Church as the family of families is the symbol and sacrament of the approaching parousiastic community of the human race.

This parousiastic community of the human race, in our African context, constitutes the company of the ancestors [10]. Hence the vital dynamic experience of the Church as sacrament is also an experience of communion beyond death. In other words, the ecclesial communion alone can fulfil the desire of the human heart and the *communion sanctorum*, the community of our ancestors [1, chapter 7/50] is the ultimate answer to the question of everlasting life and *invisible bond of love beyond the grave*.

There is no doubt that the African family has to become more and more a living and worshipping 'domestic church'; the authentic place of vital dynamic encounter with the ancestors and the God of our salvation. The African family is the authentic place of vital dynamic experience of the church as sacrament of life and union with God.

8. Conclusion

The mission of the church in Africa includes: liberating and re-vitalizing the identity of the marginalized ethnic groups; empowering them with the Gospel of love; providing real home to the refugees; solidarity with women, provide hope and sustenance and education to the African child; last but not least to overcome the scandal of violence, armed struggle and bloodshed with a culture of life, and love and peace for the integral growth and development of

every African family and person on this continent. Only then will the Church be experienced as sign and sacrament of unity and salvation.

Africa needs a Church; Africa needs a spirituality which enables and empowers Africans to live a life of 'shalom' – total well-being in their multi-religious, multiethnic, multiracial, and multi-political – economic contexts. Hence the need of the African communion-ecclesiology of unity in diversity which will inspire and motivate the African Church to live and manifest unity in diversity. The Church in Africa to be prophetic and to answer the call of evangelization has to be the symbol of a life and 'plural unity' which is more beautiful and meaningful than unity in singularity.

The African ecclesiology has to bring out the fact that the nature and essence of the Church necessarily implies plurality – in unity: the one plural unity of the Church concretely lived and experienced in the plurality of ecclesial communities in which each individual person is infinitely loved by God. The perfect beauty of plural unity found in God alone ought to find its symbolic – life expression in the Church in Africa.

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