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Allocutio: Articulating the Task for the Future of African Catholicism

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 ESSAY

Allocutio: Articulating the Task for the Future of African Catholicism



Sr. MarySylvia Nwachukwu is a sister of the religious congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love. She holds a licentiate from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome and earned her Ph.D in biblical theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. She works as the principal assistant registrar of Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Nigeria, and teaches biblical Hebrew and courses in the Pentateuch. Sr. MarySylvia is a member of national and international biblical and theological associations. She is also co-editor of the *African Journal of Contextual Theology*.

On May 8, 1996, Thabo Mbeki, then deputy president of South Africa, gave a speech on behalf of the African National Congress in Cape Town, on the occasion of the passing of the new Constitution of South Africa. In this speech, “I Am an African,”¹ Mbeki professed his commitment to the following: the African environment; the ancestors, early defenders of South African freedom and independence who were the first victims of a merciless genocide; the European migrant founders of the land; the slaves from different places who supplied the labor force; and all the heroes who fought to defend the cause of freedom in the land. Calling to mind the experience of varied brutish crimes committed against humanity and human freedom in the name of race and color, Mbeki lamented the consequences of this immoral and amoral past, which still haunt the entire nation. Through these connections, Mbeki was able to capture the entire picture of the South African national historical experience, defining himself as the product of political and sociocultural experiences. The Constitution of South Africa, which was thereby amended for authentication, depicts a new South African people, born of heroes and heroines who pledged to die rather than see the perpetuation of injustice and who were determined to build up a self-concept that is broadly inclusive. This is a political decision that is the fruit of memory of the past and of hope for a better, oppression-free future.

If memory of the past were so essential in redrafting of a national constitution that would reflect the authentic face of a nation, we should consider even more its importance in drafting a true African Catholicism. “Memory” is a key word in Pope Francis’s address to the clergy of Uganda in November 2015.² Reading through his addresses to the clergy, religious, and seminarians of Kenya and Uganda in his November 2015 journey to Africa, I was impressed that, although addressing himself to the same category of people, he contextualized each address. In each one, he

1 Thabo Mbeki, “I Am an African,” Thabo Mbeki Foundation, filmed May 8, 1996 at , video 45:44, <https://www.mbeki.org/2016/06/01/i-am-an-african-speech-by-president-thabo-mbeki-8-may-1996/>.

2 Francis, “Address to Priests, Men and Women Religious, and Seminarians,” St. Mary’s Cathedral, Kampala, Uganda, November 28, 2015, last accessed December 18, 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151128_uganda-religiosi.html.

spoke of issues particular to either Uganda or Kenya. On Saturday, November 28, 2015, in Uganda, he highlighted three essential points for the clergy, which I think are important for the future of African Catholicism: memory, fidelity, and prayer. We recall that, in its very short history, Uganda was soon blessed with a great cloud of witnesses — Anglican and Catholic lay faithful, priests, and religious — who renounced everything — property and even their lives — for the sake of Jesus. Pope Francis urged the people of Uganda to keep alive the testimony of these Ugandan martyrs, not through a superficial and empty recalling of the past but by continuing to be authentic witnesses today to the faith which they professed. This call to living witness defines what Pope Francis meant by the other two essential points of his speech: fidelity and prayer — that is, a faithful following of the way of martyrs' holiness which is sustained by prayer. As he explained, "Remembrance means fidelity, and fidelity is only possible with prayer."³

We also learn this lesson from Israel who, in composing her history with God, showed that a religious institution's character is determined by the testimony of its forebears. As a new wave of religious, political, and social unrest break out in Africa, we should receive Pope Francis's admonition to Uganda as a word to the African Church as a whole. When Israel began her history by saying, "My Father is a wandering Aramean,"⁴ she meant that Abraham's journey with God gave character to the faith professed by the people of God, all those who call themselves "Israel." In the same vein, the memory of the Ugandan martyrs is a memory which the entire Church in Africa should celebrate as the memory of their ancestors. Therefore, our search for an African identity demands that we consider ourselves products of common ancestors, their respective backgrounds notwithstanding. This may have implications for the structure of the liturgy, catechesis, and academic curricula in institutions of theology. This is a Church that is proud to have common origins with great people of faith and original theologians like Origen, Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo, Clement of Alexandria, and martyrs in the likes of Agatha, Perpetua, the Ugandan martyrs, and many others.

3 Ibid.

4 See Deut 26:5.

My references to Thabo Mbeki and Pope Francis are meant to underscore the importance of story or human experience in the formulation of every faith tradition. Catholicism in Africa, in its many expressions — liturgy, catechesis, theology, scholarship, and so on — suffers the neglect of theological interpretation of story, that is, the theological interpretation of concrete experiences of Africans in their environment. It was Martin Luther who said “. . . without experience theology is impoverished and deficient, an empty shell waiting to be filled.”⁵ I am hopeful that this new enterprise for the future of African Catholicism, rather than “copy and paste” traditions, will produce the right fruits: an African Catholicism that reflects a truly African face.

In the light of the foregoing, I propose the following areas of experience to consider in Africa which are important for the drafting of an authentic African Catholicism:⁶

- **Appreciation of the beauty of Africa** — *Beauty, variety, abundance, and music* are words that come to mind when we think of Africa’s environment, peoples, and cultures. This beauty should inspire in the Church in Africa an experience of worship out of which the African people can say “the earth is the Lord,” conveying all the weighty theological implications associated with this affirmation.⁷
- **Prophetic interpretation of Africa’s political history** — “If we understand how Israelite prophets dealt with difficult national matters of discontinuity and flexibility, we may arrive at the urgent sense of the relevance of the theological enterprise for Africa.”⁸
- **Addressing poverty with creative scholarship** — Rather than seek a solution in the generosity of a few Christians, creative scholarship should raise ques-

5 Martin Luther, as quoted in A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 193.

6 I had developed these ideas in an essay, “Theology and Human Experience”; see MarySylvia Nwachukwu, “Theology and Human Experience,” *African Journal of Contextual Theology* 1 (2009): 33-48.

7 See Ps 24:1.

8 See Nwachukwu, “Theology and Human Experience,” 44.

tions and start conversation among Africans about the continent's problem of poverty and its socioeconomic consequences.

- **Addressing the major problems of present-day Christianity in Africa** — that is, addressing its superficiality, syncreticism, and growing prominence of individualistic piety that is championed by Pentecostalism, all of which continue to obscure the importance of the cult for national existence and stability.

Again, an important task for African Catholicism's future is the task which the universal Church has set for herself in this era of the New Evangelization. In his second encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, John Paul II presents a profound interpretation of the Church's task that touches the depths of the human condition. He proposes a more intense proclamation and witness to mercy in the contemporary world which he said is "threatened by an immense danger"; he says the apostolate of mercy is a felt need for our world today:

The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of "mercy" seems to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it. This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy And this is why, in the situation of the Church and the world today, many individuals and groups, guided by a lively sense of faith are turning, I would say almost spontaneously, to the mercy of God.⁹

Mercy responds to the pleas of many human hearts, their sufferings and hopes, their anxieties and expectations; it manifests human beings in their full dignity and provides an answer to the contemporary person who is overwhelmed by spiritual miseries that are caused by holding onto false values. According to John Paul II,

9 John Paul II, Pope. *Rich in Mercy: Dives in Misericordia*. Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1981, 2, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html.

the message of mercy could convince the contemporary person to turn to God and live a life free of those false values.¹⁰ This pope devoted two of his encyclicals to this profound truth about the human situation, fully convinced that the world has more need to experience the mercy of God than ever in the history of humanity.¹¹

Thirty-five years after *Dives in Misericordia*, Pope Francis reiterates that the practice of mercy is waning in the wider culture, and in some cases, the idea has fallen out of use, because we most often focus exclusively on justice.¹² In returning again to shift the world's attention to the Gospel of Mercy, Pope Francis seems to affirm that the contemporary world still suffers the challenges which John Paul had highlighted in his encyclicals: the world is still being threatened by secularism; human beings continue to undergo sufferings and anxieties that rob them of their full human dignity; and the contemporary person still suffers spiritual miseries that are the result of holding on to false values. Pope Francis brings a renewed emphasis to the Church's need to preach and witness to mercy, which is the very foundation of the Church's life.¹³

One of the structures of this world, which Pope Francis describes and which we must stand against, is undue emphasis on the demands of the law, that is, the strict administration of justice to the detriment of mercy.¹⁴ Together with the universal Church, the churches in Africa—in all its institutions—is urged to translate into action the injunction that “pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she [the Church] makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy.”¹⁵ On this depends the Church's very credibility.

We should call to mind one of Pope Benedict XVI's many admonitions to the Church in Africa, as articulated in chapter 3 of his apostolic exhortation, *Afri-*

10 See John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 1 and 2.

11 See John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 1.

12 See “Misericordiae Vultus: Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy.” St. Peter's, Rome, Italy, April 11, 2015, 10, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html

13 See “Misericordiae Vultus,” 10 and 12.

14 Ibid., 10 and 20.

15 See “Misericordiae Vultus,” 10.

caae Munus, titled “Stand Up, Take Your Mat, and Walk.”¹⁶ He pictures Africa as the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda, who had been ill for several years and was there waiting for somebody to help him into the pool for healing. Everything changes as soon as Jesus commands him to get up and walk. Benedict XVI concludes with this illustration that what Africa needs is neither silver nor gold but confidence in herself and in her dignity as a people so blessed and loved by God. Africa needs to hear again the encouraging words of Jesus to stand up and walk. As Benedict reminds us: “We must provide the word of Christ which heals, sets free, and reconciles.”¹⁷ We need the courage to walk forward, towards building up an authentic African Catholicism which is reflected in its theology, liturgy and society.

CITING SR. TERESA OKURE

One final task that faces us as we reflect on the future of African Catholicism is our duty to appreciate and document the efforts of our ancestors. There are some among us who have taken the courageous steps to “rise and walk,” whose works speak volumes about them, who began running when others were still waiting to be helped into the pool. They are our mothers and fathers, who taught us how to be truly African, truly Catholic, truly scholarly, and truly Christian. One such person is Sr. Teresa Okure, a sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, who has celebrated fifty years of life as a woman consecrated to God.

A few days before completing this piece, I initiated a heart-to-heart conversation with her, intending to get some data from her about her life, academics, and religion which would help me compose a befitting citation on her. She had only one thing to say, that is, that everything about her success had very little to do with speed or her intelligence but much to do with God’s grace. It was God who granted her the grace and the support she needed as a young girl to succeed in her journey of faith. Many know Sr. Teresa Okure, but before I speak more about her faith, let me introduce her to those who are learning about her for the first time and those who know her only in passing.

16 Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* [On the Church in Africa]. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011, 147-171, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html.

17 *Ibid.*, 149.



If you ever come close to her and look directly into her eyes, the way she blushes might give the impression that she is shy. She appears calm and friendly, but this is only when she is not making a speech or addressing a conference. She carries herself moderately, but do not be deceived by her looks, because she is an intellectual giant. In biblical scholarship, Sr. Teresa Okure is one of the great mothers of African biblical scholarship with international renown. She earned her Ph.D. at Fordham University, in the United States, the title of her dissertation being “The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42.” She is a seasoned Bible scholar, teacher, and researcher, and she became professor of New Testament and Gender Hermeneutics at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt, Nigeria (CIWA). The title of her dissertation shows that Sr. Teresa Okure is at her best on the subjects of the Bible and gender hermeneutics, together. She is named an African feminist biblical scholar because of the belief which she professes with passion and without apologies, that is, that the “woman question” today is not a “woman issue”; it is a humanity issue. Her research in this area has one goal: to unmask the patriarchal and culturally based interpretation of the Bible which contributes to the downplaying of the unique contributions of women in the Bible and which continues to influence the modern-day perception of women.

At CIWA, Sr. Teresa has served in various leadership roles which include the following:

- academic dean of the Faculty of Theology
- head of the Department of Biblical Studies
- dean of Student Affairs
- member of various national and international theological and biblical associations
- founding president of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN)
- co-editor of the Biblical Commentary Series, Texts and Contexts (since 2010) and Global Bible Commentary (2004)

When we read the works of biblical scholars, sometimes it is easy to determine which perspective governs the scholar's efforts, whether faith or just curiosity or caprice. Sr. Okure is one of those whose research is imbued with faith. She reads and studies the word of God as a believer who seeks understanding in order to better communicate it. When the sense of a biblical text is very clear to her, you would admire the passion with which she explains it. Sr. Teresa Okure is not simply a scholar; she is also a woman of great faith. It might interest you to note that she pronounced her public vows as a religious in 1965, the very year that marked the end of the Second Vatican Council. The renewals that this council proposed shaped her vision.

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