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Liberation theology African style

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

After the pope ended his Africa swing on Monday, my wife and I remained in Cameroon for most of this week, pondering the impact of the trip and taking stock of the African church. The experience reinforced an impression I've long had, and here it is in a sound-bite: What African Catholicism has to offer the global church is liberation theology without the hang-up over ecclesiastical authority.

First, the "liberation" part. Ask the typical American Catholic to tick off important issues facing the church, and you're likely to get a dose of insider Catholic baseball: women in the church, teachings on sexual morality, the power of the pope or the bishops versus the laity, and so on. Put the same question to a typical African, and the answer is usually more outward-looking: war, corruption and bad governance, human rights, poverty.

The dominant concern in African Catholicism, in other words, is transforming society, usually in what Westerners would consider a fairly progressive direction.

That was also true of the first wave of liberation theology, which welled up in Latin America in the 1970s and '80s. What distinguishes the African version, however, is the relative absence of internal ecclesiastical battles. In Africa, there's little sense of class struggle inside the church, of posing a "church from below" in opposition to the hierarchy. For just that reason, the theology of liberation in Africa may well have more staying power, because it's unlikely to generate the same backlash from officialdom.

Seen through American eyes, all this is potentially disconcerting news for at least two camps in the Catholic community in the States.

The first is the church's cultural warriors, who think of Africa only in terms of reinforcing conservative stands on abortion and homosexuality. That's certainly true as far as it goes; many African Catholics include homosexuality on lists of social evils such as prostitution and thievery, without a trace of self-consciousness. In the same vein, the idea of a "pro-choice Catholic" seems an almost unthinkable contradiction in terms. Yet those cultural values (which are hardly exclusive to Catholics) stand alongside a cluster of other instincts that would give many American conservatives heartburn, such as a passionate critique of global capitalism, concern for climate change and environmental protection, putting curbs on corporate power, and opposing conflicts such as the U.S.-led war in Iraq. Here's one illustration of the point: at Benedict XVI's Mass in Yaoundè last Thursday, a surprising number of local Catholics sported Obama t-shirts, something that would be difficult to imagine in the States.

The second camp likely to be nonplussed is liberal Catholic reformers, accustomed to thinking of liberation theology as an ally in efforts to decentralize power in the church and to promote changes such as ending clerical celibacy or ordaining women. In reality, even the most progressive African Catholics have relatively little interest in such questions.

"Our theology reflects the problems of our communities, which are social problems, not internal ecclesiastical questions," said Fr. Antoine Babè, dean of the theology faculty at the Catholic University of Central Africa in Yaoundè, Cameroon's capital. "These Western preoccupations don't concern us very much."

Babè, who did his doctoral work in Strasbourg, points out that even the characteristic African image of the church as the "family of God" strikes a different tone from the image of the "people of God," which the Latin Americans picked up from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The latter carries a vaguely revolutionary connotation of struggles of "the people" against the ruling class. "Family," on the other hand, strikes a more harmonious tone.

"You'll never find anti-clericalism in Africa," Babè said. "We're basically receptive to authority, so we don't waste time contesting the authority of the bishops."

The basic thrust of African Catholicism is remarkably *ad extra*, concerned with changing the world, not changing the church. Here are four examples of that *ad extra* impulse in action:

Health Care

Shannon and I visited a maternity clinic in the Etoudi neighborhood of Yaoundè operated by the Daughters of Mary, a diocesan women's congregation founded in the 1930s which today has about 170 members. The clinic, housed in several simple stone buildings which are crude but remarkably clean, serves poor and low-income women. It offers pre-natal care (one of the sisters is a pediatrician, and several are nurses), arranging midwives to deliver their babies, monitoring their condition for a few days after birth, and then connecting them to early childhood services after they leave the clinic.

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We were shown around by Sr. Anne Marie, the clinic's director (members of the Daughters of Mary don't use last names). She told us that one-quarter of the roughly 200 women the clinic serves each week are HIV-positive, many of the children are under-weight and under-nourished, and some of the women have previously had clandestine abortions (abortion is illegal in Cameroon, as in much of Africa). The

sisters have been running the clinic since 1965, she said, because no one else seemed to be taking an interest in the poor women of the area.

Catholic identity is not in doubt here; Sr. Anne Marie says, for example, that the clinic counsels lifestyle changes to prevent unwanted pregnancies rather than birth control. She said that Western debates over contraception or abortion don't concern her. She takes church teaching as a given, and her passion is serving the poor.

Lay Attitudes

On Monday night, Shannon and I drove to Buea, the capital of the Anglophone area of Cameroon in the country's southwest. I had arranged for a colleague, **Charly Ndi Chia**, editor-in-chief of *The Post*, the country's leading English-language paper, to meet us for dinner. He brought another journalist, Adams Bouddih, who recently launched a new publication aimed at the youth market called *Campus News*. (Although Charly showed up in full African dress, Adams told me not to worry; as journalists, he said, "we belong to the same tribe.")

Both men are deeply Catholic, and both are outspokenly critical of many features of their societies. Charly was imprisoned during an uprising in the predominantly Muslim area in north Cameroon in 1984 for publishing an open letter to the government of President Paul Biya, asking pointedly how it was possible that official election returns had given him a majority exceeding 90 percent everywhere in the country, and then just weeks later people would take up arms against his regime. Charly said he was lucky enough to be released, though many of his cellmates were shot.

Yet when I pressed Charly to talk about tensions within the church, he said the only thing that tends to irritate the activist wing among local Catholics is when bishops seem too close to the government, unwilling to speak out against corruption or human rights abuses. He said questions of whether they're too liberal or conservative, too authoritarian or too flexible with the rules, basically don't arise. As he put it, "We have bigger problems."

(By the way, Charly and Adams took us to a restaurant in Limbé, a nearby seaside town on the Atlantic coast, where the tables are right on the beach. Small boats out in the harbor bring the fish to shore, you pick the one you want, and the cook grills it with a concoction of spices. You eat with your hands, usually while swilling a local brew. That experience alone was worth the trek.)

Good Government

I spent Wednesday morning in the offices of the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, meeting with the staff of its Justice and Peace Commission. Among other things, they showed me a remarkable document the commission produced in 2008: A detailed proposal for a comprehensive new election law in Cameroon, articulated in eight chapters and 131 sections. The proposal was the product of the church's experience of sending out teams of monitors across the country for regional elections in 2002, and presidential elections in 2004.

Although the bishops' conference was the driving force, the proposal was put together by a cross-section of politicians, NGOs, and members of civil society, including representatives of the Protestant and Muslim communities. The project was called "Nkeng-Shalom," a combination of a local tribal term for a bell that calls people together and the Hebrew word for peace. The thrust, of course, is to promote real democracy in Cameroon, as opposed to the faux elections associated with Biya's 27-year reign. (The country may see this again in 2011, when Biya is expected to ratify his grip on power with the trappings of a democratic vote.)

When I pointed out that some Catholics elsewhere might find the idea of the bishops' conference drafting an election statute, and then organizing political pressure to support it, a violation of church-state separation, these officials looked at me with a puzzled expression and asked: 'If we didn't do it, who would?'

They made the compelling argument that in Africa, Catholics have a unique capacity to speak as part of a vast international organization that gives them protection other actors in civil society generally lack. When Siméon Ombiono, coordinator of the Justice and Peace Commission, speaks out, they said, government officials know he's wearing 'the hat of the church.'

The U.S. Ambassador to Cameroon, Janet Garvey, largely agreed.

'Civil society is not really well-developed here,' she said in a Thursday afternoon interview at the American embassy in Yaoundé. 'There aren't really other forces [besides the churches]. Cameroonians are very religious. It's part of their identity, and their lives. It matters deeply what the churches say.'

Fighting Corruption

On Thursday morning, we visited the St. Joseph Anglophone Primary School to watch the bishops' 'FACTS' program, developed in cooperation with Catholic Relief Services, in action. The acronym stands for 'Fight Against Corruption Through Schools,' and it's a comprehensive anti-corruption curriculum for primary and secondary schools.

Corruption is widely considered the scourge of the continent; the African Union estimates that it costs African nations \$150 billion annually, one-quarter of their combined GDP. The idea behind FACTS is to train the next generation of African leaders in the values of transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. It's presently being used in the country's 1,300 Catholic schools, and may soon be extended to the public schools as well.

On this morning, the faculty had arranged for performances of a couple of typical skits that the students themselves develop as part of the anti-corruption program. One involved seven students, aged 9-10, four of whom played the part of youngsters who had failed their exams. They approached the kids playing their parents, weeping, while the mother fell to her knees in shame. The father then announced that he would take care of things, and went to see the child playing the school's headmaster to try to bribe him for passing grades. The outraged headmaster then threw them all out of his office, shouting 'Nonsense! Get out I say! This conversation never took place!' In the coup de grace, he tossed the attempted bribe out with them.

A poster in the one of the classrooms makes the same point. It shows an administrator telling a chagrined parent, 'It's no use bringing that goat and those plantains if your son's name is not on the admission list!'

Does all this have any effect? One educator told us a story of a young girl who had been exposed to the FACTS program, who happened to see a couple of policeman extorting a bribe from a passing motorist. She confronted them, and the cops were so taken aback that they visited the girl's school to find out what was going on. According to this educator, one was so impressed with the values being taught that he actually enrolled his own children in the school.

Conclusion

One can of course find similar programs sponsored by the church in other parts of the world, including,

with allowances for local variations, in the United States. What's striking, however, is that this is almost always the sort of thing Africans have in mind when they think about the church. More time and energy seems to go into *ad extra* activism, because proportionately less is invested in internal struggles.

Naturally, this doesn't mean everything is hunky-dory inside the African church. **I spoke to two African religious women**, Sr. Anastasie Bekono of the Holy Heart of Mary congregation, and Grace Atem, who's in formation with the order, who said that lofty talk about men and women as full partners in the church isn't matched by women playing visible leadership roles. For example, they pointed out that in both African nations he visited, Benedict XVI met with local bishops but not with the major superiors of women's congregations.

Pauline Maissaba, an articulate 24-year-old lay Catholic studying history at the University of Yaoundè, said much the same thing.

"Women are always in second place," Maissaba said, following Sunday Mass at Yaoundè's St. Kisito Parish, where the liturgy is celebrated in the local Ewondo language.

When you come to church, you always see priests, deacons, and seminarians taking charge," Maissaba said. "Women clean the church, they wash the priest's clothes, and they do the cooking. They're always doing the less rewarding work." When I asked if she would like to see women priests one day, she smiled and said, "Yes."

For his part, Babè said that while there aren't many open clashes between African theologians and the bishops "there's no African equivalent of the Catholic Theological Society of America, for example, issuing statements critical of the Vatican or the U.S. bishops' conference" that doesn't mean the relationship is one of complete trust. He noted, for example, that famed Cameroonian Jesuit Fr. Englebert Mveng, a theologian and artist whose frescoes illustrating Biblical scenes in an African idiom are often held up as examples of inculturation, was prohibited from teaching theology at the Catholic university. (Mveng was killed under still-mysterious circumstances in 1995.)

"I have that impression that the theologians and the bishops are generally travelling parallel roads," Babè said. "Sometimes they seem to fear and avoid us."

Nonetheless, these internal tensions, which are probably as common in Africa as anywhere else, don't seem to dominate Catholic consciousness. Instead, it's the challenge of transforming the outside world that seems to express the spirit of African Catholicism.

"We are preaching the gospel to real people who live in a concrete context," said Fr. Joseph Akonga, secretary general of the bishops' conference in Cameroon. "We have to work to change that context if it doesn't correspond to what the gospel proclaims."

If the 21st century is indeed to be "the hour of Africa" in the global church, as Sr. Anne Marie of the Daughters of Mary put it to us, then it would seem to augur a powerful *ad extra* wave, pushing the church out of the cloister and into the street. That may alternately delight and confound Catholics in the West, depending upon whose ox is being gored, but it promises to leave little about Catholic life unaffected.

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John Allen was in Africa covering Pope Benedict XVI's March 17-23 trip to Cameroon and Angola.

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