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An African perspective

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 14, 2006 All Things Catholic

To unpack some of this, I sat down with Fr. John Mary Waliggo of Uganda, a widely influential African theologian and currently a member of his country's human rights commission. Waliggo is an enormously appealing figure, with a ready smile, an infectious laugh, and a salty tongue. In Padua, he led a group of Africans who decided to create a steering committee for a new society of African ethicists.

How can Africa influence the global church?

For one thing, missionary congregations today come to Africa and recruit, so they have many African members. If you really looked into it, you'd find the percentages are enormous. There are also many other Africans priests and sisters serving abroad in various places. Right now, the local church in Africa usually has no idea who these people are or what they're doing, it has no contact with them. I think a critical moment will come when these Africans begin to connect with one another, to form a network, to become aware of the voice they already have.

What will they use that voice to say to the rest of the church?

First, racism will be challenged.

Second, Africans can stimulate theological development. Theology in Europe and North America is not creative enough anymore, and so they get renewed when they read theology from India, from South Korea, from Africa. Our theology is a little bit more dynamic.

For example, we have much to say about inculturation, offering new models for theological reflection ? Jesus as proto-ancestor, the idea of the dead living among us, the emphasis on active participation by all in the community. There's also African liberation theology, which includes African feminism. It's a theology that departs from injustices to Africans and by Africans. It keeps the government dancing, because they don't quite know what to do with it.

There's the theology of remembering. We Africans have our own Exodus story in the form of the slave trade, which is a story we must always remember. The past is part of us, it's a big instrument in forming our future. We also do a very historical sort of theology, such as what we

should learn from the Rwandan genocide. If you forget this sort of thing, you are naïve.

Our theological style is very concerned with narrative, expressing teachings in story. Our people listen better when you give them a story. This means using local expressions and rituals, linking the gospel to their story. Everything is brought into the story, the animals, the plants, the whole environment. It's a way of doing theology that's almost dead in the West, but it's very Biblical.

As Africans move around the rest of the church, they will carry this way of thinking and teaching with them. If I'm called to Munich or somewhere else, I won't stop my way of doing things.

What else is a distinctive contribution of African Catholicism?

We have refused to leave our cultures and traditions behind. We believe that the old wine and the new wine must be mixed together. Jesus did not come to destroy, but to create. Christianity is in general something additional to what the people already believe, not its complete replacement.

What do you think when you see Catholics in the north discussing matters such as whether the correct response should be "and also with you" or "and also with your spirit?" Is it a priority for you?

Look, I was part of the fight to get rid of Idi Amin, when my country was bleeding. I went into exile for five years, but we finally got rid of him. I wrote four books on the political education of our people. I came back, and fought against [Milton] Obote, who was no better than Amin. I had to go into exile again, to Kenya, but we got rid of him too in 1986.

I then became the General Secretary for writing the new Ugandan Constitution. We went up to all the villages to consult the people, including women, people with disabilities, everybody. It took six years to do it, but in the end the constitution is full of Catholic social teaching.

I'm now a commissioner on the Human Rights Commission. I visit the jails, and if I say so, I can get somebody released within 48 hours. The idea is to be sure that people aren't just tossed in jail and never heard from again.

This isn't just me. The chair of the AIDS commission in Uganda, for example, is a Catholic bishop.

We believe that theology must be relevant. It has to contribute to the constitutions, laws, and policies of the country. We see our role as social change agents, as people who work and unite themselves with the poor who are struggling. We do theology for them, to help them to have

life to the full.

What sort of question does interest you?
To me, the important questions are, 'How are your kids fed?' 'How do you get along with your Muslim neighbors?' I don't invent the questions, I find them in the community.

Is it true that Africans are more traditional on sexual morality?

Yes, it is true. There's a basic cultural value in our heritage in which sexuality is sacred and respected. We talk about it in very clear terms. Things such as homosexuality are not just seen as sins, but as perversions. They're seen as hideous, they make you an outcast from your clan and village. If a man impregnates his sister, or if he has sex with another man, this is a kind of social sin which people believe will bring misery on the entire village, so he'd better just go away. This is what the people believe, and [as a theologian] you can't isolate yourself from society.

The presence of Muslims is also very important. If you're a homosexual, they come to stone you. Those who practice traditional African religions would stone you too. The Catholics isolate you. If everyone agrees to that, who are we to reject it?

We've had too much armchair theology in the church. We want to be synthesizers and prophets of the people.

Do you think there will be a rupture in Catholicism on these issues, as in the Anglican Communion?
If it's pushed, it would be a big split. But the church generally tries to avoid sensitive issues which simply divide it, and I don't think it will come out "soft" on homosexuality.

What about abortion?
I identify with the victims of suffering, and no one is more speechless, more voiceless, more silent, than the unborn child. To me, it's like defending the blind. If I see someone attacking a blind person, I will beat him with a stick. This is my attitude to attacks on an unborn child too.

So by Western standards, your views are in some ways quite "liberal," in other ways "conservative."
I suppose you always fit 50 percent. But in the end, we remain accountable to our people. We don't want to be like our dictators, pursuing their own ideas and their own interests.

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