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9. Three Faces of Public Catholicism in Africa

Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC

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Abstract

Public religion assumes a variety of diverse expressions in Africa, the continent with the most Christians and fastest-growing Catholic population in the world. Through the lenses of reconciliation, development, and democratization, this article analyzes public Catholicism in three of Africa's most Catholic countries: Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These three "public faces" of Catholicism reflect the social, cultural, and economic strengths of the church in deeply religious countries. Whatever its extensive public engagement, however, the Catholic Church in the African Great Lakes region has struggled to sustain a prophetic witness in the midst of semi-authoritarian, patronage-based political systems. Notwithstanding the manifold cultural and social differences, the African Catholic public witness contains important lessons for Catholic leaders operating in the U.S. context.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Uganda, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, democracy, reconciliation, development.

Introduction

North American academic conversations on “religion in the public square” often assume an American constitutional framework of separation of church and state, focusing on past struggles over how to balance the U.S. Constitution’s non-establishment clause with the First Amendment’s guarantee of the right to religious liberty. One sees echoes of this debate in this supplementary volume as Thomas Aiello and Bryan Le Beau analyze U.S. Supreme Court controversies surrounding prayer in public schools including *Murray vs. Curlett* (1963) and *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963). Likewise, Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler’s article on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ evolving teachings on religious liberty also critically examines how a national church negotiates its moral teachings within a broadly secular, pluralistic public space. Beyond the halls of academia, one could plausibly argue that this debate has been a central fulcrum in American Catholic history, from the nineteenth-century immigrant church’s efforts to sustain a separate Catholic subculture to John Courtney Murray SJ’s 1950s rapprochement with “American freedom” to Richard John Neuhaus’s founding of *First Things* in the 1990s to defend the role of religion in the “naked” public square (McGreevy 2004).

However, the public square is not limited to the United States, nor should the American Catholic Church become a Gallican church.¹ So while recognizing this volume’s understandable emphasis on the American context, I wish in this article to expand our horizons further abroad. As has been attested in a host of recent studies (Jenkins 2011; Zurlo and Johnson 2019), the beating heart of twenty-first-century Christianity is not in Europe or the Americas. Rather, the vibrant center is now in Africa, whose communal and deeply religious cultures have largely resisted the advent of the “secular age” that Charles Taylor (2007) has associated with the rise of Enlightenment modernity. Africa’s current Christian population numbers around 700 million, making it the largest Christian continent in the world (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2021). Yet Africa itself is not a monolith. The continent includes fifty-four nation-states and over 2,000 languages, making it the most ethnically and linguistically diverse place in the world (“Number of Living Languages” 2023). Religiously, Africa is the only continent with roughly equivalent Christian and Muslim populations, and no single denomination or tradition dominates the Christian world. For example, even as scholars alternately marvel or fret at the recent rise of Pentecostalism in Africa, many overlook the fact that the continent includes more Catholics than Pentecostals (Zurlo and Johnson 2019, 9). Yet Catholic populations vary in size and influence from the miniscule (Ethiopia) to the minority (South Africa and Nigeria) to the dominant majority (Burundi).

Given this diversity, I will not try to analyze African Catholicism writ large in this paper. Rather, I will limit my analysis to three countries in which I have lived and/or conducted research over the course of nearly two decades: Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For all their differences, these countries also have sufficient similarities to yield important comparative insights. First, they border each other. Part of a

¹ Gallicanism refers to the early modern French notion of a “Gallic church” in which ecclesiology was framed in nationalist terms. Political authorities had widespread control over church appointments and practices. Similar church-state models were common in early modern Spain, and the Anglican communion after Henry VIII also adopted this Erastian approach.

central African region known as the “African Great Lakes,” they are marked by their proximity to large waterbodies such as Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, and the Congo River. This geography has also facilitated sizeable migration across borders, particularly between Uganda, Rwanda, and the eastern Kivu districts of DRC. More tragically, proximity has also brought these nations into major conflict in recent decades, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the resulting Great Congo War of 1996–2002 (Prunier 2009; Reyntjens 2009; Stearns 2011). Second, all three countries’ modern histories have been deeply shaped by the Catholic Church. The first long-term Catholic communities in early modern Africa started in what today is the border region between DRC and Angola (Thornton 1984). Originating in the powerful witness of the 1886 Buganda Martyrs, Uganda became home to the largest and most vibrant Catholic population during the modern missionary wave of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For its part, Rwanda developed the closest approximation to a “Catholic Christendom” in twentieth-century Africa, with the ruling class and three-quarters of the population claiming the Catholic faith by the mid-twentieth century (Carney 2014, 36–40). Simply put, Catholicism has been publicly consequential in these countries in a way that is not the case in much of southern and western Africa where super-majorities of Protestant, Pentecostal, and African Independent communities dominate the Christian scene.²

I will further delimit my analysis to what I see as the leading face of public Catholicism in each of these three countries. To be sure, the vast social, political, and economic contributions of the Catholic Church transcend any narrow typology, reflecting its unmatched provision of social services, education, and healthcare in Africa. In 2010, the Catholic Church ran 33,000 primary schools, 10,000 secondary schools, and 16,000 health centers in Africa, leading Paul Gifford to conclude that “no other single agency on the continent can rival this contribution” (2015, 90). But it is equally true that in post-genocide Rwanda, the language of *reconciliation* dominates public discourse; churches play central roles in trying to heal both a divided society and wounded hearts. Likewise, in Uganda the Catholic Church has been the leading non-state agent of social *development*, all framed within the national motto of serving “God and my country.” Over the past three decades in the DRC, the *Conférence Épiscopale Nationale du Congo* (CENCO), along with numerous grassroots actors, have embraced a public face of *democratization*, becoming what the Congo Research Group recently described as the nation’s largest “moral and political challenge to the ruling elites” (Congo Research Group and Ebuteli 2022, 6). At the same time, each of these public emphases—reconciliation, development, and democratization—comes with certain shadow sides, especially in terms of compromising the Catholic Church’s necessary prophetic voice within often corrupt, authoritarian, and unjust social structures.

Rwanda: The Public Face of Reconciliation

Although its early twentieth-century missions remained largely on the margins of Rwanda’s public square, the Catholic Church moved into a position of social and political dominance with the accession to the throne of Mwami Mutara Rudahigwa in 1931. His rise

² To be sure, Francophone Catholic countries in western Africa, such as the Republic of Congo, Togo, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, or Côte d’Ivoire, have significant Catholic populations.

came after Belgian and French missionaries, led by the White Father missionary Mgr. Léon Classe, engineered a *coup d'état* that led to the exile of his traditionalist father, Mwami Musinga. The 1930s saw what missionaries described as a *tornado* (tornado) of conversions both among Tutsi elites and within broader Hutu and Tutsi peasant populations. In 1946, Mwami Rudahigwa formally dedicated Rwanda to Christ the King (Carney 2014, 36–41). The Church's public face in this era could be summarized as one of royalist integralism—converting the king and building the top-down Christendom model envisioned by White Father missionary founder Charles Lavigerie.

As Rwanda hurtled through a rapid decolonization between 1956 and 1962, this royalist, aristocratic vision shifted to one of popular democracy and social justice. Unfortunately, this *volte-face* took the form of underwriting the Hutu social revolution of 1959–62, which led to unprecedented civil violence and the forced exiling of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi civilians (Carney 2014, 121–74). By and large, though, the postcolonial Catholic Church continued to support this intertwining of Hutu nationalism and Christian democracy from 1962 until 1994, blending its colonial commitment to public influence with the newfound liberal ideals of social justice, development, and democratization for the Hutu masses. It did not hurt that Rwanda's postcolonial Hutu leaders wore their piety on their sleeves and publicly championed Catholic morality. As Gérard Prunier has argued, the Catholic Church was the key institution in linking the previous Tutsi aristocratic myth with the new Hutu egalitarian myth: “It [the Catholic Church] had admired the Tutsi and helped them rule, but now admired the Hutu and helped them rule. In both cases, this was perceived (and abundantly explained) as being the work of divine providence and a great step forward in the building of a Christian society in Rwanda” (1995, 81).

The fatal flaw of this model of public religion was its deeply ethnicist character, and the entire edifice came crashing down in 1994 as Hutu radicals mobilized a popular genocide that killed nearly one million Tutsi over the course of one hundred days. Although the manifold roots of the genocide resist analytical reductionism, the warped ideals of Hutu social justice and Hutu democracy were integral factors. As Hutu Power media such as *Radio Télévision Libre Mille* (RTL) and the Kanguru newspaper goaded Hutu civilians to defend their country against the invading Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and their alleged fifth-column Tutsi collaborators, Catholic leaders emphasized the RPF's threat to Rwanda's founding ideal of Hutu democracy and traced the violence to the pre-1959 “feodo-monarchical regime dominated by the minority Tutsi ethnic group” (Denis 2022, 89; Longman 2010, 183; Carney 2014, 199). Writing weeks after the genocide, Hutu Catholic exiles continued to warn of the risk of returning to “pre-1959 slavery” (Prunier 2009, 6). For church leaders, such concerns had been magnified by the RPF's assassination of three Catholic bishops in June 1994.

In the decade after the RPF ended the genocide and established a new political regime, a very tense relationship developed between the Catholic Church and the Rwandan state. Given the fact that twelve percent of genocide victims died in Catholic parishes (Denis 2022, 93), as well as the active complicity of a minority of clergy and the widespread silence of the hierarchy, the Catholic Church lost a tremendous amount of moral credibility in Rwanda. Bishop Augustin Misago of Gikongoro was put on trial for genocide complicity; around forty lower-level clergy and religious faced both domestic and international tribunals (Denis 2022, 208–15). An older generation of Catholic leaders interpreted much of this through the lens of

anticlericalism rather than accountability. In some cases, such as the 2005 trial of White Father priest and human rights activist Guy Theunis, “genocide ideology” charges did appear to be a thinly veiled guise for silencing critics of the state (Longman 2017, 132).

Yet at the same time, a new generation of Catholic leaders, many of them genocide survivors or Tutsi returnees from Uganda, began to shift the church’s language and public stance toward reconciliation. Beginning with the jubilee synod of 2000, these leaders pushed for a more self-critical, penitential attitude that would move away from the triumphalism of the past. Given the centrality of reconciliation and forgiveness to Christian theology and practice, churches and Christian ministers also played important roles in facilitating reconciliation across Rwanda’s hills. Local ministries such as Father Octave Rugirangonwa’s “*gacaca nkirisitu*” (Christian *gacaca*) at Mushaka Parish in southwestern Rwanda introduced a counseling and ritual process for excommunicating and reintegrating genocide perpetrators (Carney 2015, 797–800).³ Charismatic Catholics like Kigali’s Anne-Marie Mukankuranga spearheaded prison ministries and integrated communities of former combatants and widows, guided by the simple yet radical conviction that “God’s love has no boundaries” (Carney 2015, 796). If the bishops still delayed in issuing a public statement of repentance, their rhetoric became notably less defensive, and church-state collaboration grew during Rwanda’s national *gacaca* process between 2002 and 2012.

A breakthrough of sorts happened in November 2016. At the end of Pope Francis’s Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Rwandan bishops finally issued a statement of regret that assumed a degree of ecclesial responsibility for the genocide:

We apologize for all the wrongs that the church has committed. We apologize on behalf of all Christians for all forms of wrongs committed. We regret that church members violated their oath of allegiance to God’s commandments. . . . Forgive us for the crime of hate in the country to the extent of also hating our colleagues because of their ethnicity. We did not show that we are one family but instead killed each other. (Rutagambwa 2023, 300)

Yet even here the generic nature of this statement—failing to name specifics or admit culpability for the church as institution—raised as many criticisms as plaudits. In March 2017, President Paul Kagame met with Pope Francis in Rome, and Francis subsequently issued a more forceful (if still vague) statement that admitted the “failures” of the church in 1994 and the need for a deeper “purification of memory” (Bonnell 2017). Under the leadership of Cardinal Antoine Kambanda of Kigali, the Catholic Church has publicly presented itself as a humble servant of Rwandan society, furthering reconciliation and forgiveness within an overall theological lens of divine mercy (Kambanda 2023, 60–61).

This ecclesial shift to reconciliation is surely commendable, especially in comparison to the arrogant triumphalism that marked so much of the Rwandan Catholic Church’s public

³ *Gacaca* was originally a traditional mode of Rwandan dispute resolution in which conflicting parties requested adjudication “on the grass” outside a chief’s home. Christian *gacaca* should not be confused with the much larger “national *gacaca*” process that unfolded in Rwanda in the 2000s. Involving over two million genocide-related cases, national *gacaca* was one of the largest transitional justice efforts in recent history. On the complexities and controversies of Rwanda’s national *gacaca* process, see Clark 2010 and Ingelaere 2016.

engagement in the twentieth century. And even as the Catholic percentage of the population has fallen from 63 to 44 percent since the genocide (Denis 2022, 311), the Catholic Church remains the single largest Christian denomination in the country, running one-third of health facilities and playing a central role in facilitating “*kubana*” or “living together” in the hundreds of villages that dot Rwanda’s hills (Luxmoore 2019; Burnet 2012, 170). In turn, forgiveness and reconciliation are core Christian concepts that stand at the heart of the gospel message, making reconciliation a natural and obvious public face for the Catholic Church. And although Rwanda’s 2011 constitution is formally secular, religion and religious discourse remain central parts of public life in a way that would be foreign (or at least far more contested) in the USA. In Rwanda, church and state have separate spheres, but it is expected that they will cooperate in service to the common good.

All that being said, the Catholic Church’s public face of reconciliation has a downside. Throughout the country’s modern history, church leaders have generally shied away from direct critique of state authorities. When Grégoire Kayibanda’s government orchestrated the killings of upwards of 14,000 Tutsi in 1964, church leaders lamented the violence but cast no blame or responsibility on the government actors who had organized the massacres (Carney 2014, 178–84). Although such appalling massacres are not unfolding in today’s Rwanda, Kagame’s government is still known for brooking no dissent, to the point of even assassinating and arresting critics well beyond the country’s borders (Wrong 2021). For all its positive elements, the public and ecclesial emphasis on reconciliation can serve to silence both political critique and calls for social justice in the name of broader national harmony. Finally, in an authoritarian political culture that is strongly pushing the reconciliation agenda, questions arise on whether citizens retain the freedom essential to forgiveness when they cannot openly express themselves in public (Burnet 2012, 193).

Uganda: The Public Face of Development

As mentioned in the introduction, the entire African Catholic Church is notable for its emphasis on social development. In this sense, Uganda is less an outlier than an exemplification of a broader continental and, indeed, global trend. The Catholic Church runs Centennial Bank, Uganda’s single largest microfinance bank with unmatched reach in rural areas. The church also operates Kampala’s St. Francis Hospital Nsambya, widely seen as the best in the country, in addition to a huge network of dispensaries and clinics that dot rural villages and urban slums alike. Each of Uganda’s nineteen dioceses has a formal office for Caritas, the Catholic Church’s international development wing. In this sense, the Ugandan church has excelled in what French political scientist Jean-François Bayart termed “extraversion,” namely securing international funding for development projects through ecclesial, NGO, and state networks (2009, xii). Yet as the anthropologist China Scherz has argued, church agents often understand better than secular NGOs the nature of cultural attitudes toward charity and wealth, including the need for patronage and relational reciprocity in development work (2014, 2, 19).

As in Rwanda, there is a history behind why development has become the public face of Catholic Uganda. Religious identity had political overtones going back to the Buganda Martyrs and the “religious wars” of the 1890s in which British-backed Anglican factions ultimately

marginalized their Catholic rivals (Médard 2007:488–503).⁴ However, unlike its southern neighbor of Rwanda, Uganda did not see a Catholic government come to power during the colonial era. Rather, Catholics and Anglicans competed for converts in the late nineteenth century before the latter, backed by newly arrived British colonial officials, became the *de facto* state church during the first half of the twentieth century. The relative political marginalization of the church led its leaders to focus more on pastoral work and social development. In the words of Joseph Kiwanuka, the Ugandan Bishop of Masaka and first African Catholic bishop in modern times, “I have discovered that the leadership people want me to exercise in the country is not political as such, but rather leadership of offering good and wise education, which will help our nation and put it on the right track. In such responsibility I can be a leader without necessarily annoying the political rulers” (Waliggo 1990, 25).⁵ In turn, late colonial mobilization of Catholics to advocate for further representation in government—such as the efforts of the Democratic Party (DP) in Buganda—often met with violent counter-reactions. So although postcolonial Catholic leaders spoke out when their direct interests were threatened, such as against the 1963 Education Act that challenged the autonomy of Catholic schools (Carney 2017, 776), they mostly steered clear of political critique in an era notable for the rise of Milton Obote’s single-party rule, Idi Amin’s capricious violence, and the brutal civil wars that dominated southern Uganda in the 1980s and northern Uganda in the 1990s. Postcolonial political leaders were also adept at hurling the epithet of religious “sectarianism” at any religious actor or party who dared to challenge their authority. Not unlike Rwanda, religious reconciliation and ecumenism were encouraged by political authorities in part to marginalize religious critics, even if they also had the salutary effect of de-escalating historic religious divisions in the country (Carney 2017, 777–80).

A good example of this development model was the figure of Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga. Born and raised in the southern kingdom of Buganda, Nsubuga was appointed Archbishop of Kampala in 1966, succeeding the aforementioned Joseph Kiwanuka. Shaped by his trademark motto “let us pull up our socks and together we will succeed” (Kimbowa 2005, 33), Nsubuga embarked on an ambitious program of social ministry and development projects during the next quarter-century. After founding Centennial Bank, the primary provider of microloans for rural Ugandans, Nsubuga started several religious congregations dedicated to working with the poor and disabled, such as the Good Samaritan Sisters and the Amans Brothers. He not only approved the building of Nalukolongo Home for the disabled, aged, and destitute, but he volunteered there on most Friday mornings during his episcopate. In the words of his nephew, “[he] hated to see people suffer . . . he was a lover of the poor, those who were helpless” (Kiwanuka 2015). Nsubuga fundraised internationally and within

⁴ Even in the late colonial period, political parties retained religious overtones. The Democratic Party (DP) and the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) were popularly known as *Dimi ya Papa* (Religion of the Pope) and the “United Protestants of Canterbury” (Welbourn 1965, 1).

⁵ Kiwanuka did not always follow his own advice. After becoming Archbishop of Rubaga (later Kampala) in 1961, he issued a controversial pastoral letter entitled “Church and State” in which he called for Kabaka Edward Muteesa of Buganda to become a constitutional monarch and banned Catholics from joining a new political party closely associated with the *kabaka* (king). This led to the arrest of one of his clerical lieutenants and a vicious political campaign against the Archbishop by Kabaka Muteesa and his allies (Kiwanuka 1961; Earle and Carney 2021, 161–64).

Uganda to construct Namugongo Martyrs Shrine in time for the 1979 centennial of the arrival of Catholic missionaries in the country. Namugongo now routinely draws over one million pilgrims for the June 3 feast of the Uganda Martyrs, making it the largest Catholic pilgrimage site in Africa. Although Nsubuga spoke out strongly against Obote's abuses during the civil war of 1981–85, he also largely kept quiet during the Amin era, and he cultivated a close relationship with Museveni after the latter came to power in 1986 (Carney 2020, 41–57).

Another more grassroots face of the Catholic Church's development paradigm was Sister Rose Muyinza. A childhood convert to Catholicism who joined the Little Sisters of St. Francis religious congregation, Sister Rose later set out on her own to found a street ministry for marginalized young women. The group became known as the "Daughters of Charity" and worked with nearly 3,000 youth, including many young men. Members came from Uganda's legions of war refugees, orphans, AIDS victims, special needs children, or other marginalized people. One associate described Sr. Rose's ministry as reaching out to the "*okuyamba abanaku*," the "people without people" ostracized from the social and family networks that provide the primary social safety net in Uganda (Namazzi 2017). Importantly, though, Sr. Rose kept a low political profile, and she also leveraged relationships with powerful women such as Janet Museveni, the president's wife, to fundraise for her initiatives (Carney 2020, 78–94).

An even more innovative example of the public face of development is Radio Pacis in the northwestern region of Arua. Founded in 2004 with the mission of integrating human rights, "gospel values," and devotional programming, Radio Pacis was named the best new radio station in Africa by the BBC in 2007. Its frequencies now reach over ten million listeners across five languages in Uganda, South Sudan, and northeastern DRC. Even as it broadcasts Mass, scriptural meditations, and the rosary, its largest listening audiences come in the 85 percent Muslim districts that surround Arua itself. This stems from the station's reputation for broadcasting truth and providing platforms for local people to speak, including South Sudanese refugees (Carney 2019). Its social mission is captured in the words of one of its founders, the American lay missionary Sherry Meyer: "Jesus always preferred the poor, the lame, the sick, and those on the margins, and this entails issues of justice, human rights, courts, corruption, and healthcare access" (Meyer 2017).

There are evident strengths to Uganda's public face of development. The Catholic Church remains a huge contributor to the social welfare of the nation and especially the poor and marginalized. If Catholic leadership was corrupted by its access to political authority in Rwanda, the church retained much more integrity in Uganda in part due to its historical distance from the halls of power. The Ugandan model also reminds us that social action does not necessarily entail politicization, a message that Americans should take note of.

However, one can ask whether the Ugandan Catholic Church's depoliticization has gone too far in a country where the president is nearing his fifth decade in power. Similar to the reconciliation model in Rwanda, the development model leads the church to work in partnership with the state, serving "God and country" and avoiding direct criticism of state leaders, especially the president. When it comes to recent political elections, church leaders have been largely quiescent and quiet (Alava and Ssentongo 2016). Coming to office in January 1986 on the backs of a rebel insurgency movement, Museveni show no signs of allowing free and fair elections and looks likely to either put forward his son or stand for another term in

2026. Yet moving away from an early association with Marxism, Museveni has skillfully played up the crucial role of religion in public life as well as the important roles of the churches in supporting economic development, education, healthcare, and traditional sexual morality and gender roles. The state in turn has lavished funding on various church projects and institutions.⁶ This feeds the perception that Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) has through patronage bought the silence not just of the Catholic Church, but of most religious institutions in Uganda (Alava and Ssentongo 2016, 678, 684). This overall "NGO-ization of the church" has enabled churches to facilitate a remarkable range of social development projects, whether in food production, micro-finance, food nutrition and agricultural productivity, water sanitation, HIV and AIDS education, or conflict resolution (Gifford 2015, 96). What has eluded the churches, though, is any tangible amelioration of the state's authoritarianism, undermining of elections, or corrupt patronage systems. For a more promising model of this, let us turn now to the Catholic Church's public witness in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

DRC: The Public Face of Democratization

Turning the clock back a century, the notion that the Congolese Catholic Church would become a bastion of democratization would have sparked derision.⁷ A core member of what Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja called the "colonial trinity" of church, state, and commerce (2002, 3), Belgian Congo's Catholic Church shared the established nature and colonial favoritism that its Rwandan neighbor enjoyed during the first half of the twentieth century. As in Uganda, the colonial Congolese church became a major purveyor of education, healthcare, and agricultural development. In places like Kongolo in southeastern Belgian Congo, historian Reuben Loffman has argued that "the church was the state" in terms of the social and legal services it provided to local people (2019, 7). But whatever its commitment to "developmental colonialism" (Pistor 2020, 270–72), church leaders in the 1950s looked askance at growing movements for decolonization, nationalism, and democratization, seeing in all of these a toxic, anti-clerical mix sure to jeopardize the Edenic Christendom that missionaries had carefully constructed.

When revolution and decolonization swamped Belgian Congo between 1959 and 1961, the Catholic Church was initially caught flatfooted. The church had made little effort to indigenize its hierarchy, belatedly appointing Joseph Malula as the first Congolese adjutant bishop in 1959 (a full twenty years after Kiwanuka's episcopal appointment in Uganda). The Catholic Church was so closely associated with the colonial order that rioters targeted Catholic institutions during the Leopoldville uprisings of January 1959, and rebel militias systematically attacked Catholic missionary outposts throughout the early 1960s (Vanyacker 2016). Congo's first prime minister, the nationalist Patrice Lumumba, promised to strip the church of its privileges in education and to move the new nation toward a formally secular constitution

⁶ As a personal anecdote, I witnessed President Museveni promise four hundred million Ugandan shillings (over \$100,000) for the construction of a new building at Uganda Martyrs University, the country's main Catholic university. This came at the university's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 2018 (Carney 2018).

⁷ I will use language of "Congo" and the "Congolese church" to refer to the Catholic Church in DRC, not the neighboring Republic of Congo (sometimes known as Congo-Brazzaville).

(Oyatambwe 1997, 28–29). Far from a champion of democracy, the Catholic Church seemed to be its primary obstacle, not unlike the French First Estate during the revolutionary fervor of the 1790s.

And yet with its very survival on the line, the church pivoted quickly. Meeting in plenary conference in 1961 prior to the convening of the Second Vatican Council, Congo's still predominantly European missionary hierarchy embraced a turn to the laity, calling for the establishment of base ecclesial communities and a more robust theology of baptism where the laity would "make the Church" (*Actes de la VI Assemblée* 1961, 23). The bishops also called for a deeper inculturation of the church as both "authentically Christian" and "authentically Congolese" through integrating faith and daily life in Congolese villages and families (*Actes de la VI Assemblée* 1961, 164–65). Without sacrificing its hierarchical structure, then, the Congolese Catholic Church made a democratic pivot within its own ecclesial life and lay base communities and lay administrators known as *mokambi* (chiefs) became the pastoral order of the day in the 1970s and 1980s (Moerschbacher 2012, 108–131).

The rise of Malula also enabled the church to move further away from its colonial roots. Himself a nationalist who had called in 1959 for a "Congolese church in a Congolese state" (Saint Moulin 1997, 52), Cardinal Malula embraced not only lay leadership but the deeper inculturation of the Congolese liturgy, culminating in the 1988 promulgation of the Zaire Rite with an official Vatican seal of approval (Sundkler and Steed 2000, 1022). When dictator Mobutu Sese Seko turned against the church in 1972, banning Christian names, suppressing Catholic youth associations, and planting youth party wings in seminaries, Malula briefly left the country but ultimately refused to acquiesce to state pressure (Adelman 1975; Ugeux 1988, 51–53). When copper mining and the broader economy declined in the late 1970s, Mobutu relented from his anticlerical crusade, spending much of the next decade trying to buy off Catholic bishops with Mercedes Benzes and other perks (Oyatambwe 1997, 63).

With the end of the Cold War and a growing Western consensus in favor of democratization, Mobutu grudgingly allowed for the introduction of a multiparty system in 1990. More momentously, civil society actors, including many church activists, launched the *Conférence nationale souveraine* (CNS) in 1991, a massive gathering of over 2,000 delegates tasked with rewriting the constitution and charting Zaire (as DRC was then known) on a path toward a more democratic future. When Mobutu tried to shut this down, activists took to the streets, including priests and lay Catholics of the Amos Group who organized the March of Christians in February 1992. The brutal suppression of this march further galvanized the opposition, and Mobutu agreed to allow the CNS to reconvene, this time under the leadership of Catholic Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo (Oyatambwe 1997, 100–183).

The profound destabilization of the 1994 genocide and subsequent Great Congo War of 1996–2002 pushed DRC into one of the worst social catastrophes in modern African history. Over four million perished during the war, including Mobutu himself (albeit in the relative tranquility of a cancer treatment center in Europe). Rwandan-backed militias raced across the country, and in May 1997 the Congolese exile Laurent Kabila was installed as president. Kabila proved to be a more independent figure than his Rwandan supporters expected, though, and they arranged his assassination in January 2001 (Wrong 2021, 323–24). Kabila's son Joseph

Kabila then took power and saw DRC through the signing of the Sun Peace Accords in 2003 and the country's first democratic elections in 2006 (Prunier 2009, 269–77, 311–14).

It was in the early 2000s that the Catholic Church emerged as a major actor in the democratic process in DRC. Although CENCO continued to publicly write on social questions, the bishops' conference pivoted in 2003 to become more involved in civic education, advocacy, and ultimately electoral oversight. Beginning with the 2006 elections, the Catholic Church deployed tens of thousands of election monitors, a tradition that remains up until the present (Lomandja 2023). The church also became one of the primary certifiers of elections. As president of Congo's independent electoral commission, the late Abbé Apollinaire Malu-Malu played a particularly important role in overseeing both the 2006 and 2011 elections. The Catholic Church trained legions of Justice and Peace commissioners and other laity in Catholic Social Teaching, to the point that the Vatican chose Kinshasa to be the home of the Pan-African Institute for the Social Teaching of the Church (Alima 2013).

This democratic advocacy reached a crescendo in the late 2010s. When President Joseph Kabila postponed 2016 elections and maneuvered to extend his stay in power beyond the two-term constitutional limit, CENCO lobbied Kabila to reconsider. Meanwhile, the Catholic faithful mobilized in the streets. Kabila signed the church-mediated Saint-Sylvestre agreement in December 2016, agreeing not to contest the next elections, yet continued to refuse to set an election date. In 2018, CENCO supported three mass protests, and Kinshasa parishes rang bells every Thursday night to demand that Kabila step down. Kabila relented and withdrew his name, and elections were finally held in December 2018 with the Catholic Church providing 40,000 election monitors. Given high levels of mistrust of the state, CENCO oversaw a parallel vote-counting operation and certified Martin Fayula as the winner; Kabila's preferred candidate trailed far back in third. A backroom deal between Kabila's team and second-place Felix Tshisekedi led to the installation of the latter as president in 2019. Controversially, CENCO ultimately agreed to certify Tshisekedi's election, in part to ensure a peaceful transfer of power for the first time in DRC's history (Congo Research Group and Ebuteli 2022, 10–11). Catholic leaders again mobilized tens of thousands of election monitors for presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2023 that saw Tshisekedi returned for another term as president.

DRC's Catholic Church has thus fully embraced democratization as its public face in the twenty-first century. In this sense, CENCO has adopted a more explicitly political mission than its ecclesial counterparts in Uganda and Rwanda. As National Justice and Peace commissioner Alain Lomandja (2023) told me, "CENCO sees social and political engagement as part of the mission of the Church." Although such language can raise eyebrows in the West, DRC's Catholic bishops should be commended for serving as what Raphael Okitafumba Lokola calls "custodians and awakeners of conscience," taking advantage of the church's overall institutional and moral credibility to serve as a prophetic advocate on behalf of the people (2020, 187).

As with reconciliation and development, though, there are downsides to the church's democratic face. First, church leaders have not always navigated the temptations of power, bribery, and the risks of politicization, and bishops have struggled to retain a united front across ethnic and party lines. Questions also arise on what balance the church should strike

between its mission *ad intra* and its mission *ad extra*. As one base community leader in Kinshasa complained to me, “Our bishops are more interested in politics than pastoral life!” (Carney 2023). In turn, the political and social strength of the Catholic Church in DRC also reflects the glaring weakness of a state that fails to provide adequate public services in much of the country. But whatever its ambiguities and inevitable shortcomings, the Congolese Catholic Church should be commended for its investment in the democratic process, helping DRC to challenge the one-party authoritarianism that has so marked the postcolonial history of the region.

Conclusion: Lessons for the U.S. Context

To return to where we started, let us close with a brief application to the U.S. context. To be fair, American Catholic leadership operates in a fundamentally different political, religious, and cultural environment. U.S. constitutional law is formally secular; religious practice is on the decline, especially among Millennials and Generation Z; and religion is typically associated with conservative politics. This lends a partisan and generational charge to the debate over public religion largely missing in the African context. In addition, the clergy sex abuse scandal has taken a major toll on institutional Catholic credibility in the USA, and most Catholic voters make their decisions with little regard for the quadrennial voting guides issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Unlike their Congolese counterparts, American bishops are not about to be enlisted to serve as “the conscience of the nation.”

Yet the Catholic Church retains a public face in this country, and the communal, relational nature of Catholic theological anthropology and the political implications of Catholic social teaching resist any modern privatization of religious faith. In this regard, I would reject any idealization of the Jeffersonian “wall of separation,” whose rightful rejection of the establishment of religion can easily slide into the marginalization of religious voices within public life. Yet neither is an Evangelical, neo-Constantinian model of church-state alliance the most faithful way for the church to present itself in public, as the seeking of state power inevitably corrupts the church and often compromises the religious freedoms of non-adherents. At the same time, the love of neighbor entails a social witness, and laws, policies, and political life have a determinative impact on the common good, the understanding of morality, and the “communal consciousness” of the society (Jacobsen 2021, 23–24). For all these reasons, then, Christian churches need to be engaged in social advocacy, development work, and the struggle for justice. The American church should not fear wading into the public sphere, but it should do so prudently, bearing in mind the following three lessons from these case studies in Rwanda, Uganda, and the DRC.

First, these cases point to the need for grassroots investment. Any credibility that Congolese, Rwandan, or Ugandan Catholic leaders possess stems not from the eloquence of their pastoral letters (which few read), but rather from the church’s active work on the ground. I think here of the manifold parish and prison reconciliation ministries unfolding in Rwanda, or the ways in which local base communities facilitate human rights education in Congo’s eastern Kivu districts, or how Ugandan priests and parishes provide medical care, education, vocational training, clean water, and even innovative initiatives in integral ecology (Carney 2015; Alfani 2018, 48; Katongole 2022). In reality, the overarching public face of African Catholicism in these three countries is one of active social engagement in their people’s lives.

This type of engagement is not wholly absent in the American context, as any cursory review of urban social welfare ministries reveals. But the church's national sociopolitical engagement can often seem more concerned with lobbying Washington officials or guiding voting decisions than exemplifying a church which is "bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets" (Francis 2013, 49). The American Catholic Church's road back to relevance will happen not through pontificating, but rather through pastoral service.

Second, all three cases underline the need for churches to engage the most pressing issues facing a society, yet also maintain a certain prophetic distance from political actors. Reconciliation, development, and democratization are not just concerns for the Catholic Church in these countries; they are central public concerns to the citizenry as a whole. In this sense, the church should be commended for being where the people are. This is a helpful reminder that the church's mission *ad extra* cannot be limited to its own institutional interests, or even the interests of its Catholic members, but rather should engage the common good of the whole community. However, this type of public engagement brings evident risks of corruption, politicization, or even excessive depoliticization. The Congolese bishops have much to teach us about the need to engage the political sphere constructively, while not losing sight of the church's call to be a prophetic advocate rather than a partisan player or therapeutic counselor. If American church leaders are only going to Washington to participate in the National Prayer Breakfast, they have sacrificed something essential in their witness.

Finally, these three cases point to the need to adopt multiple public faces. Reconciliation is essential in post-genocide Rwanda, but so are justice and freedom of speech. The Ugandan church should continue to help people improve their lives but also must remain wary of the danger of "meet[ing] the immediate needs of people without asking too many questions" (Katongole 2009, 108). The Congolese church's commitment to democratization has much to be commended, yet elections themselves do not constitute a democratic society, nor should a hierarchical ecclesial system lack all bottom-up accountability. Rather than cave to culture war polarization, the American Catholic Church should interweave its advocacy around its diverse, cross-cutting social teachings, from the dignity of the unborn to climate activism to the rights of migrants and refugees. The church should not fit neatly into a single ideological or political box; genuine catholicity transcends a single public face.

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