

# “Africans, You May, and You Must Have an African Christianity”: Toward a Mature African Catholic Theology of Ressourcement

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## Abstract

This article commemorates 2025 years of Christianity by reflecting on the faith from the perspective of the Church in Africa, chiefly within a Roman Catholic framework, and by arguing for a mature African Catholic theology of *ressourcement*. In response to Pope Paul VI’s affirmation that “Africans, you may, and you must, have an African Christianity”, it argues that African Christianity, as treated here, is a fully Catholic yet authentically African expression of the one universal Church, rooted in communion with the Pope and the apostolic tradition. Using a qualitative theological method grounded in magisterial documents, major African and Western theological texts, and selected social-scientific studies, the article moves beyond earlier models of adaptation and highlights inculturation as a deep interaction between the Gospel and African cultures in liturgy, community life, and moral practice. Drawing on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and a *ressourcement* approach, it proposes an integrated vision of belief, celebration, moral life, and prayer within African contexts. It also surveys key currents and figures in African theology and shows how African Christology, ecclesiology, and biblical interpretation respond to concrete African realities. It concludes by calling the rapidly growing Church in Africa to deepen its theological and spiritual life and to develop a mature African Catholic theology of *ressourcement* that enriches the whole Church while promoting liberation, human dignity, and integral development.

## Keywords

Church in Africa, African Catholic Theology, African Christianity, Inculturation, *Ressourcement*, 2025 Years of Christianity, Church as Family of God

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## 1. Introduction

This paper commemorates 2025 years of Christianity by reflecting on the faith from the perspective of the Church in Africa, and more specifically from a predominantly Roman Catholic perspective. Its purpose is to argue for a mature African Catholic theology of *ressourcement*. Taking as its guiding text Pope Paul VI's affirmation—"Africans, you may, and you must, have an African Christianity" (Paul VI, 1969)—the essay contends that African Christianity is called not merely to receive the faith but to express it in a way that is both fully Catholic and authentically African. This task requires a return to the sources of the faith—Scripture, the Fathers, the liturgy, and the great tradition of the Church—and a rereading of them in dialogue with African cultures, histories, and experiences. Because the present study primarily works within Catholic ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and magisterial sources, it does not claim to cover all forms of Christianity in Africa equally; rather, it focuses chiefly on African Catholic theology.

## 2. Context and Theological Framework

Christianity has become one of the most demographically significant and publicly visible religious realities in Africa. Recent demographic, sociological, and theological studies note both its major growth and its expanding role in public life, education, health care, social services, and moral discourse (Cheetham, 2022; Gathogo, 2022; Jenkins, 2011; Nwachukwu, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2018). This gives added urgency to theological reflection as Africa marks 2025 years of Christian history in communion with the universal Church.

Following *Donum veritatis* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1990), theology is a service that gives the truths of revelation an organic and systematic form. In that spirit, this essay focuses less on a full history of Christianity in Africa than on a new stage: the emergence of a mature African Catholic theology of *ressourcement*. By this, I mean a form of theological reflection that deliberately returns to the normative sources of Christian faith to think from within African histories, symbols, and communal life. It is "mature" because it avoids both cultural parody and romanticized appeals to the past. It differs from adaptation, which often modifies only externals; from Africanization, when that term means primarily cultural relocation; from inculturation, which refers more broadly to the reciprocal process between Gospel and culture; and from liberation theology, whose central emphasis is emancipation from oppressive structures. *Ressourcement* does not negate these approaches; rather, it grounds and deepens them.

The Church in Africa is not a marginal or parallel reality but a concrete manifestation of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Each local church, under its bishop, participates fully in the universal Body of Christ in communion with Peter; the universal Church exists in and from the local churches, yet is not reduc-

ible to a mere federation of them (Kasper, 2000; McDonnell, 2002). In this sense, Africa's heritage is first and foremost Christian, even when lived and celebrated through African cultural forms. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, with its fourfold structure of belief, celebration, moral life, and prayer, offers an integrated framework for this theological task (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2015).

The guiding questions are therefore these: In the light of 2025 years of Christianity, for which African theologies are we responsible today? Can African Christians remain authentically African while being fully Christian—and fully Christian while remaining authentically African? This essay argues that African theology, especially in Christology, ecclesiology (Church as Family of God), biblical hermeneutics, and inculturation, can grow into a healthier theology of *ressourcement* that deepens African faith and enriches the whole Church (*Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 1990; John Paul II, 1995; Mukadi, 2025).

### 3. African Christianity

Two statements are especially significant for the development of African Christianity. First, Pope Paul VI told African bishops in Uganda: “You may, and must, have an African Christianity” (Paul VI, 1969). He encouraged Africans not simply to receive a Christianity shaped elsewhere, but to live and express the faith in ways that genuinely reflect African cultures and values. He added, “By now, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves,” emphasizing that Africans themselves are responsible for transmitting and deepening the faith.

Second, Cardinal Joseph Malula summarized this new responsibility by saying that whereas missionaries once came to evangelize Africa, it now falls to Africans to Africanize Christianity (Luyeye Luboloko, 1999). This Africanization is not a rejection of the universal Church but a distinct mode of participating in it.

As the Church commemorates 2025 years of Christianity, African Christianity appears not merely as an adaptation but as a genuine expression of the Gospel within African cultures (Baur, 1998; Bediako, 1992, 2004; Bujo, 2006; Mbiti, 1969, 1971; Mulago, 1962). Yet this does not imply a separate church. Paul VI was clear: the Church in Africa must first of all be Catholic. It must remain rooted in the apostolic tradition while allowing diverse expressions of the one faith (Paul VI, 1969).

### 4. The Church in Africa and Inculturation

Inculturation is essential for communicating the Gospel. Rooted in the Incarnation, it is not a superficial pastoral method but part of the Church's very mission. John Paul II (1995, No. 59) defines inculturation as “the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church.” The *International Theological Commission* (1988) likewise presents it as a process in which Christ's message penetrates a sociocultural milieu, allowing what is compatible with the Gospel to grow and be transformed.

At the same time, the Gospel is never reducible to any one culture. No culture,

however valuable, can become the ultimate criterion of faith. Every culture must therefore be judged, purified, and elevated by the Paschal Mystery. This is why African theology has gradually moved from older language of adaptation to stronger notions of context and inculturation.

A particularly clear example is liturgy. With approval of the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire, the Congolese bishops developed a liturgical form that incorporated African rhythms, gestures, and communal participation without compromising Catholic Eucharistic faith (*Conférence Épiscopale du Zaïre*, 1989; Kabasele Lumbala, 1998). This example shows that inculturation does not weaken the liturgy; rather, it enables the same mystery to be received more deeply within a people's symbolic world.

## 5. The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers a systematic exposition of Catholic faith in four parts: belief [lex Credendi], celebration [lex Celebrandi], moral life [lex Vivendi], and prayer [lex Orandi] (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2015; *Vatican II*, 1966). This structure provides a fruitful framework for African theology of *ressourcement*. What the Church believes must be celebrated; what is celebrated must shape moral life; and all of this is sustained by prayer.

Henri de Lubac is especially important here. He opposed any theology that isolates doctrine from Scripture, tradition, and lived experience, and he resisted a sharp separation of nature and grace (de Lubac, 1946, 1989; Komonchak, 1990; von Balthasar, 1987). Read together, the *Catechism* and de Lubac suggest that African theology should not split lived African experience from Christian doctrine. Rather, it should show how grace fulfills, purifies, and transforms culture from within.

## 6. African Theology or African Christian Theology

Within African contexts, the four classical *lex* can be read as interwoven dimensions of Christian existence. They shape understandings of community, ancestry, creation, liturgy, moral life, oral prayer, lament, praise, and social obligation (Bujo, 2006; Healey & Sybertz, 1996; Idowu, 1973; Kabasele Lumbala, 1996, 1998; Mbiti, 1969, 1971).

At the same time, “African culture” and “African theology” must not be treated as uniform realities. Africa contains immense linguistic, historical, ecclesial, and cultural diversity. General claims must therefore remain cautious. What is proposed here is a framework capable of engaging multiple African contexts rather than reducing them to one essence.

### 6.1. African Theology

African Christian theology critically examines the Gospel, Christian tradition, and African realities through African lenses. Because of the continent's diversity, it is often better to speak of African theologies. Three broad currents may be distin-

guished: African theology in a general cultural sense; Black theology in South Africa; and African liberation theology, focused on liberation from social, political, economic, and anthropological oppression (Bujo, 1980, 2006; Mveng & Lipawing, 2000; Tarimo, 2004; Tshibangu, 1960; Penoukou, 1982).

## 6.2. African Theologians

African theologians have approached African reality in different ways. Idowu engages African traditional religion; Tshibangu emphasizes theology as science; Agossou develops a theology of fraternity; Bujo proposes a theology of life; Penoukou articulates a cosmotheandric vision; and Nyamiti presses toward more systematic theology. Healey and Sybertz stress narrative, oral tradition, and community experience as theological sources (Agossou, 1987; Bujo & Muya, 2003, 2005).

Recent peer-reviewed work also demonstrates the continuing vitality of African Catholic theology. Gathogo (2022), Nwachukwu (2023), Orobator (2008), and Mukadi (2025) show that African theology remains an active field in which ecclesiology, inculturation, ethics, public theology, and African Christological reflection continue to develop.

## 6.3. Historical Overview

Since the mid-twentieth century, African theology has grown alongside political independence and cultural renewal (Bujo & Muya, 2003, 2005). Early thinkers such as Placide Tempels (1969) and Dominique Zahan (1979) drew on traditional religion, philosophical ideas such as vital force, and the broader symbolic world of African spirituality. Over time, African bishops and theologians increasingly insisted on incarnation rather than mere adaptation, especially at and after the 1994 Synod for Africa (John Paul II, 1995). In the wider horizon of 2025 years of Christianity, this development marks an important stage in the Church's ongoing reception of the Gospel in African contexts.

## 6.4. Use of the Bible

African Independent Churches often make strong use of Old Testament themes because of their resonance with African life. African biblical interpretation seeks to:

- respect the historical context of Scripture,
- engage African cultural categories, and
- empower local communities as interpreters of the Word (Healey & Sybertz, 1996).

## 6.5. Christology

African Christology may be grouped into comparative, systematic, liberationist, and community-based approaches (Bediako, 2004; Bujo, 1980; Haight, 2000; Haight, 2005; Kabasele, 1991; Nkwoka, 1991; Nyamiti, 1984; Papu, 2015; Schille-

beeckx, 1982). In many African contexts, Jesus is known and loved as Savior and Lord who protects and delivers. Titles such as *ancestor*, *elder brother*, and *chief* seek to express his significance through African categories. This diversity of Christologies echoes Schillebeeckx's (1982) insight that the Church must continually interpret the person and work of Christ in ways that resonate with local histories and cultures.

The image of Jesus as Elder Brother has been especially influential. Nkwoka (1991) presents Jesus as *Okpara* in Igbo thought; Nyamiti (1984) develops Christ as Brother-Ancestor; Sawyerr (1979) and Kabasele (1991) treat Christ as Ancestor and Eldest Brother; Bediako (2004) and Aarbakke (2018) show how such titles help African Christians recognize Jesus within African experience. Yet these titles require clear theological criteria. They are valid only in an analogical sense and must remain governed by the rule of faith. Christ is not merely one ancestor among others; he is the incarnate Son, true God and true man, the unique mediator. Cultural titles are therefore acceptable only when they preserve both continuity and transcendence: continuity, because grace assumes culture; transcendence, because Christ purifies and surpasses every cultural symbol (Bediako, 2004; Nyamiti, 1984; Papu, 2015).

This Christology also has social implications. If Christ is understood as Elder Brother, authority is reframed as service, solidarity, mediation, and responsibility for the vulnerable. Such an image can support reconciliation and restorative justice within African societies (Nkwoka, 1991; Tarimo, 2004). African theologies of salvation likewise remain holistic, addressing the whole person and the whole community and confronting poverty, corruption, violence, and other forms of social brokenness (Mbiti, 1969, 1971; Mukadi, 2016; Mveng & Lipawing, 2000; Ogbonnaya, 2019; Shorter, 1978).

## 7. Conclusion

As the Church celebrates 2025 years of Christianity, Africa has become one of the vital centers of global Christianity, but numerical growth must be matched by theological, spiritual, and pastoral depth (Baur, 1998; Jenkins, 2011). Paul VI's call for "an African Christianity" remains urgent. It calls the Church in Africa beyond superficial appropriation and mere adaptation toward a mature theology of *ressourcement* grounded in Scripture, the Fathers, the liturgy, and the great tradition of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2015; de Lubac, 1946, 1989; John Paul II, 1995).

Such a theology resists dualisms between nature and grace, doctrine and life, and the universal and the local Church. It insists that the one apostolic faith can and must take genuinely African forms. At the same time, its scope must be stated carefully: Africa is internally diverse, and neither "African culture" nor "African theology" is homogeneous. The proposal offered here is, therefore, intentionally general and primarily Catholic in scope. This need for renewal and contextualization is emphasized by Sesboüé (1996), who highlights the pastoral and ministerial

challenges facing the contemporary Church.

A mature African Catholic theology of *ressourcement* has implications beyond the ecclesial sphere. It can help shape public ethics, leadership, reconciliation, and solidarity in African societies. The way forward requires stronger theological formation, deeper inculturation, sustained engagement with social realities, and doctrinal fidelity within the life of the Church. If taken up with courage and humility, such a theology will show that African Christianity is not a parallel church, but a source of renewal for the universal Church and a living witness that the Gospel can be truly universal and deeply African.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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