

## FINDING GOD IN SOUTH SUDAN AND THE USA

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**J**ERÓNIMO NADAL'S often-cited phrase, 'the world is our house', fascinated me the first time I came across it.<sup>1</sup> As a Jesuit, I have had the opportunity to live in many different contexts as I have studied and worked with people of various cultures. The richness of their cultural diversity and the depth of their love for God and God's people have been hallmarks of the Jesuits I have met so far on that journey. Nadal's words are a reality in my Jesuit life.

My most recent Jesuit journeys brought me to two contrasting worlds, one of great material deprivation and the other of great abundance: South Sudan and the United States of America respectively. Both worlds are in different ways 'frontiers' for the experience of God's presence and love. Frontiers, according to the thirty-fifth Jesuit General Congregation, are 'those physical and spiritual places' where Jesuits work but which 'others do not reach or have difficulty in reaching'.<sup>2</sup> These frontiers are what Pope Francis calls in *Evangelii Gaudium* the peripheries of society. He says,

... each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey His call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel (n. 20).

I lived and worked in South Sudan for two years from 2012 to 2014 for my regency, and in the United States from 2014 to 2018 for my theological studies.<sup>3</sup> My journey to these frontiers helped me to grow closer to God and God's people.

<sup>1</sup> MHSJ MN 5, 54.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, 'Address to the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus', 21 February 2008, n. 2, in GC 35.

<sup>3</sup> Regency is a stage in Jesuit formation which involves living in a community and working in a ministry—often teaching—for two or three years before embarking upon theological studies.

I should like to reflect on the spiritual experiences I had and the lessons I learnt from Jesuits and other men and women when I lived in these two places. How did I find God in these two deeply contrasting contexts? What challenges did those contexts present to me in my quest to be close to God and the people of God?

### ***Faith and Hope amid Material Deprivation***

The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) destroyed most of Sudan's infrastructure and left the people with physical and emotional wounds. South Sudan got its independence on 9 July 2011. One year later, in July 2012, I was sent to work as a teacher at Loyola Secondary School in the town of Wau.<sup>4</sup>

In accepting this mission I remembered the message of Pope Paul VI on a visit to Uganda in 1969: 'by now, you Africans are missionaries to yourselves. The Church of Christ is well and truly planted in this blessed soil.'<sup>5</sup> I had never thought seriously about mission in that way before. I had assumed that missionaries only came from Europe and the United States to work in Africa, as I had observed in my native country of Kenya. I had not thought of Africans as missionaries within their own continent.



*Prayers at Loyola Secondary School*

<sup>4</sup> This school is the first Jesuit ministry in Sudan, started by Jesuits from the former Detroit Province in 1982.

<sup>5</sup> Paul VI, homily at the eucharistic celebration concluding the symposium of the bishops of Africa, Kampala, Uganda, 31 July 1969.

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When I received my assignment I was energized by the fact that I was going to be a missionary to my own African people. I was happy, too, that I was responding to Pope Francis's exhortation not to forget the people living on the margins of society, such as those in South Sudan.

In my life and ministry in South Sudan, I was moved by the poverty that I saw. However I could also see that people were happy. Where did that happiness, and their deep sense of dependence on God, come from? I took the vow of poverty three years before I got to South Sudan. However, arriving there, that vow took on a different dimension. I kept asking myself: how can I live my vow of poverty in a more radical way, in a way that can be more freeing and lead to this happiness that abundance cannot provide? The people of South Sudan taught me the true meaning of the beatitude, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven' (Matthew 5:3). I met men and women dedicated to the service of people in great need. Their enthusiasm for the saving work of God gave me encouragement and hope for the future of this new country. I met many people who had left their comfort zones in order to be with the poor who needed them. Sometimes it was that presence, more than any material assistance, that the local people needed.

My students at Loyola Secondary School were intelligent, creative, hopeful and full of initiative. The poverty and the precarious situation in the country made me expect to find resentful people who were without hope. On the contrary, they were full of joy and happiness even though they had so little. Most were born during the Second Sudanese Civil War, and the resilience they showed was spectacular. I was happy to be there to share my life with them. My initial fear of going to a country so recently at war dissipated when I encountered the joyful and hopeful young South Sudanese men and women at Loyola. My students' faith in God was unshakeable. They taught me how to depend on God's providence in the midst of material deprivation.

The school was unlike other Jesuit schools I had seen in Africa. The infrastructure was inadequate; the students were much older—some were over thirty; and trained teachers were difficult to find. Later, I learnt that what I was witnessing was 'emergency education' in a post-war situation—an approach to education that responds to the needs of communities affected by war in an adaptable way.

South Sudan had barely been independent for two years when violence broke out again. A civil war, mainly between the two major ethnic groups, the Nuer and the Dinka, began in December 2013 and led

to the disintegration of the country into a state of chaos.<sup>6</sup> At the time I was away on my annual retreat. Immediately after the eruption of the war, my provincial asked all the Jesuits assigned to work in South Sudan who were out of the country to return. On 18 January 2014, I travelled back to South Sudan from Kenya. As I was disembarking at the Juba International Airport, I saw a huge Russian Antonov aeroplane. Many people were carrying domestic paraphernalia such as mattresses, blankets, pots and pans, and were running to board the Antonov in order to be evacuated.

Watching what was unfolding that day made me feel so sad. The South Sudanese people had suffered decades of war, and now their chance of peace was about to be taken away again. I wanted to do something to help them, but there was nothing for me to do. I just surrendered the situation to God. I was afraid because the soldiers at the airport, who were wielding M-16s, looked trigger-happy. I thought that shooting could start at any time. However, deep within me, I felt God's abiding presence promising that all would be well and that I was not to lose hope.

In Juba that January I saw many NGO people being evacuated. I felt so scared and unsure whether I was supposed to be getting into the country or getting out of it like the NGO people. However, I reminded myself that I was not an NGO employee, but someone motivated by a Christ-centred mission urging me to stay with people who were suffering and oppressed at a time when they needed consolation, support and reassurance. That is what my provincial was telling me by asking me to get back to South Sudan. I kept reminding myself that, as a witness to the message of Christ, I am called to stand with the suffering people of God. That thought made my return to South Sudan easier. I felt confirmed by God that I was doing the right thing. My mission in South Sudan taught me to be a person of faith, hope and love in the midst of uncertainty and under the threat of war and violence.

Although the situation in which I was working was precarious, even threatening, I felt God's presence. It was a time to depend on God's providence and love. Many times, I felt abandoned and insecure, but thinking about the local people who had no choice but to live in that situation kept me going. As time went by I developed a deep love for the people and I wanted to journey with them in all they were experiencing.

<sup>6</sup> See John Ashworth, 'South Sudan: How is the Church Responding to Africa's Forgotten War?' *The Tablet* (12 January 2017).

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Living out of my comfort zone helped me grow in my trust in God's providence. When I felt insecure, I kept remembering that I was on God's mission and not my own.

It was disturbing to realise that the problems of South Sudan cannot be solved in the near future. Living with that reality was hard. However, God granted me the grace to realise that my presence and solidarity with the South Sudanese was what was important. Christ continually calls each Christian to be a witness to the gospel through a positive presence in challenging situations. Christian friendship and hospitality are the most important gift that the people of South Sudan need. The people of South Sudan radiate humanity, are full of dignity and warmth. They welcome newcomers as strangers who must become friends. It was an honour to serve them and to share my life with them.

### **Coming to America**

I saw the Eddie Murphy comedy *Coming to America* while I was in high school in the 1990s. Murphy plays the role of the young and extremely pampered Crown Prince Akeem of the fictional African kingdom of Zamunda. He hates his privileged but constrained life and wants to be free to follow his deepest desires. When his parents present him with a bride whom he has never met, Akeem decides to look for one he can love. He and his friend travel to the New York City borough of Queens and rent a filthy apartment in Long Island, where they get their first experience of culture shock. I, like most of my high-school mates, had a dream of going to the United States, the land of the free, just like Crown Prince Akeem. When I got to the USA, the romantic Hollywood idea that I had about it disappeared. I noticed that the challenges I faced back in Africa are also found in the US, but in a different form. I realised that the USA as depicted in Hollywood movies is not the real USA.

Going to the US to study theology—at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California—was my first time living outside the African continent. Being away from my own culture was rough in the beginning, and the culture shock took many months to overcome. My first encounter with the many different US cultures—African American, Hispanic, Caucasian, among others—was overwhelming. It was humbling to see how the USA is a kind of mosaic of people from all over the world. I had lived for a significant period in three African countries other than Kenya, but could still identify with the different African cultures that I



encountered. There were many similarities between my Kenyan culture and those I found in South Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and so I did not experience a significant culture shock.

It was also my first time living with Jesuits from all over the world: from India, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Russia, Japan, Hungary, Slovakia, Burkina Faso, Germany and Croatia, among other countries. It was an enriching experience to see how these diverse people from diverse cultures could come to live together in harmony. Studying in such an international environment helped me appreciate the Society of Jesus as worldwide reality. I learnt in the novitiate that, in theory, I had joined the whole Society of Jesus, not merely a Province. That theory became a reality to me when I saw the Jesuits in my community from all over the world who were 'friends in the Lord' brought together in 'union of hearts and minds'.<sup>7</sup> The experience made me feel open to being sent to work in any part of the world where there is a need for me to work for the greater glory of God.

*Being a Black, Non-American Jesuit in the United States*

The first thing that surprised me when I got to the USA was how race was a controversial subject. I had never been so conscious of my blackness when I lived in Africa, but a few months after my arrival in the US an African American friend told me 'the moment you stepped into the US, your race became an issue for debate'. That shocked me because I had heard about racial tensions in the United States, but did not know what the debates around race and racism in the US were.

My first frightening experience was learning about the police killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island in July 2014. That incident and the protests around it traumatized me for months.<sup>8</sup> Even after the tragic death of Eric, cases of police brutality, including the shooting of black people, have continued to occur.<sup>9</sup> Afterwards, I heard about the Black Lives Matter movement and its activities nationwide, but also about those who were responding with the slogan 'All Lives Matter!' I was so confused and

<sup>7</sup> Antonio M. de Aldama, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: An Introductory Commentary on the Constitutions* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1998), 265.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Garner died when New York police placed him in a chokehold while arresting him for a minor offence. Despite the death being ruled as a homicide the officer involved was not indicted for manslaughter, leading to widespread protests.

<sup>9</sup> See Josh Hafner, 'Police Killings of Black Men in the US and What Happened to the Officers', *USA Today* (30 March 2018), available at <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/03/29/police-killings-black-men-us-and-what-happened-officers/469467002/>.



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scared about what was going on. What if I walked down the block and got shot just because I was black? Back home in Africa my family and friends kept asking me: are you safe in the USA? Paradoxically, they never asked me that question when I lived in South Sudan. They knew that, somehow, I would be safe. But the new situation of racism in the US scared them so much that they thought that I would die. While I lived in a war situation in South Sudan, I did not feel as scared as I felt in my first few months in the USA because of the colour of my skin.

Two years after my arrival, the Jesuit School of Theology began a series of reflections on racism that I found very insightful. They helped me as an African not only to begin to appreciate how the racism in the US affects me as a black non-American Jesuit, but also to think about the vice of tribalism that is endemic to Africa. Racism and tribalism are both forms of exclusion that need to be challenged by the Christian value of inclusivity.

A question that nagged at me was: why do we only have about fifteen African American Jesuits in the United States? I was invited to attend a formation gathering in Clarkston, Michigan. At that meeting, I felt lost because I was the only black person in the room. It felt like sitting in an exclusive club. There were a few Asian Americans and some Hispanic Jesuits present at the meeting, but no one else black. A scholastic asked the provincial why there were no African Americans in formation at that time. I was not convinced by the answer given that day. I did not understand why there are almost no black vocations for the Society in

the US, even though the Jesuits have high schools and other institutions dedicated to the education of black people. Since there are very few African American Jesuits, it was almost impossible for me to have a meaningful conversation with fellow black Jesuits of the US Society of Jesus and hence I felt that I did not grow in my understanding of the African American Jesuit experience.

I was invited to preach on Black History Month 2018 at St Patrick's Church in West Oakland, California, where I worked for three years.<sup>10</sup> I was worried because my experience and culture as a black non-American are different from that of African Americans. I had to struggle to understand African Americans although we have the same skin colour. How could I preach about black history in the United States, when I am so ignorant of that history? My first instinct was to say no: I said to myself, 'the fact that I am black is not good enough to justify my preaching on black history in the USA'. But, after wrestling with that thought for a while, I took up the challenge; by then I had four years of experience of being a black person in the United States, and I also knew that I could draw on my experience from Africa in ways that could illuminate black experience in the US. I believed that the Spirit would lead me through the whole process.

Discovering the Black theology of James H. Cone, Jaime Phelps, Shawn M. Copeland, Cornel West, Brian N. Massingale and other African American theologians was an eye-opener.<sup>11</sup> I began to understand the plight of African American people theologically. I also endeavoured to put Black theology into conversation with African theology as I studied; that was one great gift I received in the US. I was surprised by how the two are so different, reflecting their different contexts. Black theology, as I have come to understand it, has its starting point in the experience of slavery and racism in the United States, while African theology begins from the perspective of the colonial and post-colonial experience of the continent.<sup>12</sup> I had an initial resistance to Black theology since I felt that racism is not part of my experience as a non-American

<sup>10</sup> 'Black History Month is an annual celebration of the achievements of African Americans and a time for recognizing the central role of blacks in US history. The event grew out of "Negro History Week", the brainchild of the noted historian Carter G. Woodson and other prominent African Americans. Since 1976, every US president has officially designated the month of February as Black History Month. Other countries around the world, including Canada and the United Kingdom, also devote a month to celebrating black history': <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-month>, accessed 2 January 2018.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Black theology see James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 17–20.



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black but, as I continued to live in the US, I realised that I was not cushioned from racism, and thus I had to do something about my naïveté. I soon felt that being in the USA as a black person without confronting racism is to be complicit with racist attitudes inherent in the country. Therefore, I started to take discussions of race seriously.

The suffering and discrimination that African American brothers and sisters endure in the USA have helped me to understand the meaning of hope and resilience in new ways. African Americans undergo many little deaths in their lives, times when they feel that all hope is gone, but there are many resurrections too. As I interacted with my fellow black people in the US, I could see these resurrections in their families, workplaces, schools and communities. These people know how to celebrate life; the brightly coloured clothes, the drums, the dancing, the music, the food and all that was showcased during Black History Month every February were signs of hope for a better future. African American people's faith in God moved me just as the faith of the South Sudanese had. They taught me to believe that everything is in God's hands. God walks with the suffering people; God is always on the side of the oppressed.<sup>13</sup> I believe that the suffering that black people endure will not last forever, a day will come when all men and women, whatever their race, 'will be able to sit down together in the table of brotherhood and sisterhood'.<sup>14</sup>

**God is  
always on the  
side of the  
oppressed**

*Jesuits Owning Slaves?*

I was shocked to learn that the Jesuits in the US had owned slaves. The question that kept nagging me as an African Jesuit was: how am I complicit in that dark history? As a member of the Jesuit order, I am not outside the social sin committed by the Society of Jesus. That reality affects me although I am removed by many years from the sin itself. Being part of the race that was oppressed by slavery, I nevertheless find it hard to condemn the Society to which I belong for the sins it committed against black people who came from Africa. The fact that US Jesuits had owned slaves was shocking to me; but it did not blind me to the reality that the US Jesuits have also done good things in Africa—such as founding the Loyola Secondary School where I worked in South

<sup>13</sup> See James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther King, 'I Have a Dream', speech given at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 1968; published edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 22.

Sudan. This is the ambivalent history with which I am called to live as an African Jesuit. I am part of an order that is capable of both good and evil. This fact helped me to reflect on my own capacity for good and evil and thus to be attentive to the movements of the spirits in my life in order to avoid evil and do good.

Georgetown University's apology for owning slaves moved me. On 18 April 2017, it apologised for its role in the 1838 sale of 272 enslaved individuals for the university's benefit. The apology took place in the company of more than a hundred descendants of slaves.<sup>15</sup> As an African, I felt that that was a good move in the right direction. However, as a black non-American Jesuit, I felt that it had come too late in history; as people who examine our consciences frequently, I think that the Jesuits should have apologised many years ago.

I believe that this sin affects me as a black Jesuit and I feel called to solidarity with the black people in the USA who suffer from the consequences of slavery. In my work at St Patrick's Church in West Oakland, I tried to reach out and be in solidarity with the African American community as a way of standing with people oppressed by a sin that my order committed against their ancestors. This was my small way of saying that I am part of the problem, and thus I am sorry and ready to confront that past.

#### *Living Religious Vows Contextually?*

As an African Jesuit living in the USA, I noticed the difference in how Jesuits lived the vows of obedience, chastity and poverty in the two different contexts. These vows, especially obedience and poverty, are lived contextually. The form of the vows is the same in all contexts, but their interpretation and living out are slightly different from one situation to another.

An example will suffice. One day I overheard a US Jesuit asking a Jesuit from Africa: 'do you have a villa house in your Province?' I was amused by the question because, in a country such as South Sudan, where ordinary people are struggling to survive, the Jesuits cannot have the luxury of a villa house—a place set aside for rest and relaxation: that would not be feasible contextually. Furthermore, many provinces in Africa

<sup>15</sup> See 'Georgetown Apologizes for the 1839 Sale of 272 Slaves, Dedicates Buildings', <https://www.georgetown.edu/news/liturgy-remembrance-contrition-hope-slavery>, accessed 2 January 2018.

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do not have the resources to own such a house. Things such as the villa house, which would be considered as acceptable within the vow of poverty in the USA, may not necessarily be viewed in the same way elsewhere in the Jesuit world. This fact reminded me of the need for adaptability and flexibility in understanding the contexts in which Jesuits live.

I had heard about consumerism in the United States while I lived in Africa. Consumerism, from a sociological perspective, 'is the belief that personal well-being and happiness depends to a very large extent on the level of personal consumption, particularly on the purchase of material goods'.<sup>16</sup> Living in the US, I saw its effects first-hand. There was always a temptation and pressure to follow what was the dominant trend in society. I was surprised by how frequently some Jesuits changed their phones. I bought an iPhone 5 which, at the time when I bought it, I felt was too expensive. Four years later, some people were shocked that I still had the same phone. That experience made me reflect on how I live my vow of poverty in a consumerist society. As I lived in the USA, I prayed for the grace to resist the consumerist culture and live a frugal life for the greater glory of God. At the same time, I noticed that most people in the US are not rich and consumerist, as I had thought. They live modest lives and sometimes struggle to make ends meet.

On the vow of obedience, I was amazed by the amount of trust that superiors in the USA had in the Jesuits, and their openness to the work



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<sup>16</sup> Rachel Dwyer 'Expanding Homes and Increasing Inequalities: US Housing Development and the Residential Segregation of the Affluent', *Social Problems*, 54 (2007), 23.

of the Spirit through prayer and discernment. I was equally surprised to learn for the first time that in the USA Jesuits apply for jobs like any other person and are sent to work in specific missions by the provincial only once they have been hired after a long interviewing process. My experience of mission in Africa was that Jesuits discern with the provincial and then he sends them directly on a mission without this application process. I had to understand that mission, too, was done contextually and that my experience was limited.

Moving as a vowed religious from Africa to the United States was both joyful and challenging. Negotiating contextual differences was difficult for me, and I needed a lot of spiritual capital to understand the new context in which I was living instead of making rash judgments.

*On Personal Relationships: American and African Ways*

I grew up in a context in which an African communitarian ethos was the norm, in which people derive their identity from personal relations in the community. Communal belonging defines a person's identity.<sup>17</sup> It is in such a communitarian context that African concepts such as *Ujamaa* and *Ubuntu* emerge. These focus on a person as he or she is related to the community and not just as an individual.

*Ujamaa* is a Kiswahili word which connotes familyhood, togetherness and fraternity.<sup>18</sup> It was popularised by Tanzania's first president, the Venerable Mwalimu Julius Nyerere.<sup>19</sup> In articulating the meaning of *Ujamaa*, Nyerere used other expressions alongside *familyhood*, such as caring, well-being, reciprocity, togetherness and universal hospitality.<sup>20</sup> In *Ujamaa* spirituality, a person becomes fully human when he or she is in communion with others. Conversely, *Ubuntu* is derived from the Xhosa people of South Africa. It is a 'worldview based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion, and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family'.<sup>21</sup> Both *Ujamaa* and *Ubuntu* focus on the communal aspects of a person first before considering him or her as an individual.

<sup>17</sup> See Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2013), 45–46.

<sup>18</sup> Oliver Alozie Onwubiko, *The Church in Mission in the Light of Ecclesia in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines, 2001), 34.

<sup>19</sup> A Cause for the canonization of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere is ongoing. See <http://www.catholicstandardgh.com/beatification-cause-for-julius-nyerere.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford UP, 1968), 1–12.

<sup>21</sup> Johann Broodryk, *Ubuntu: Life Lessons from Africa* (Tshwane: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 2002), 56.

As I lived in the USA, I felt that my African communitarian ethos was undermined by an individualist ethos within US culture. I knew about US individualism before I arrived, but I did not understand it until I started living there. Relationships in the US, according to my experience, centre around individual freedom and self-reliance, and decisions are made on an individual basis with little influence from the community. This was very difficult to understand for a person who comes from a communitarian culture. I also felt that most people in the US used 'I' too much in their conversations. I was surprised by that because in Africa 'we' predominates over 'I'. Most Africans believe in the maxim, 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am'.<sup>22</sup>

I think that a dialogue between the African communitarian ethos of *Ujamaa* and *Ubuntu*, and the US individualist ethos can be mutually enriching. Both world-views have their merits and demerits. On the one hand, excessive communitarianism can stifle creativity. On the other, excessive individualism can destroy personal relationships. A moderate amount of individualism, coupled with what Kwame Gyekye refers to as 'moderate communitarianism', which values creativity and freedom, can help Jesuits and others from both worlds to grow in becoming authentic 'friends in the Lord'.<sup>23</sup>

While in the USA, I developed a habit of taking a bus or a train instead of driving a car in order to be close to the ordinary people. Encountering people in this was illuminating. I felt God's presence by just looking at people's faces and observing what was going on. Sometimes, I encountered people with mental illness or under the influence of hard drugs. Being on a train or a bus was an opportunity to experience the joys and struggles of the people by just being present and aware that God was always there in the midst of the challenges that people experience.

What surprised me in most buses and trains in the United States was how people minded their own business. Everyone was on the phone or had a book to read. No one seemed to care about others unless he or she knew them. This felt like a world of isolation such as I had not experienced in South Sudan or Kenya. In Kenya, *matatu* minibuses are

<sup>22</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990), 141.

<sup>23</sup> Kwame Gyekye argues against extreme communitarianism by advocating for a moderate form of communalism. He affirms that human persons are rational, capable of virtuous conduct and can make moral judgments. He further argues that the community does not create these 'mental features', but only discovers and nurtures them. They play a major role in who a person can become; therefore, personhood is not wholly bestowed on the individual by the community. See Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 53.





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the common means of transport.<sup>24</sup> In a *matatu*, people talk, crack jokes and laugh with one another even if they are strangers. There is a lively spirit in *matatus*, especially in the countryside. When I travelled in the USA I missed this spirit.

### **My Ministry at St Patrick's Parish**

I liked working as a high-school teacher in South Sudan, and I longed to find a place where I could do some form of ministry when I came to the US to study theology. While I was studying I had the opportunity to be part of the church community at St Patrick's parish in West Oakland, a poor neighbourhood in the San Francisco Bay area. St Patrick's is a teaching parish for the Jesuit School of Theology, where students learn contextual theology.<sup>25</sup> I learnt how to be a minister and to journey with people on the margins of a wealthy society during my time at St Patrick's.

St Patrick's parish was established in 1887 to serve the needs of Irish immigrants who were employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad Company in Oakland. By the 1950s, it had slowly become a mixed parish, with Mexican immigrants and African Americans joining the community. In 1999, the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley took up the responsibility

<sup>24</sup> *Matatu* is a Swahili word connoting 'three'. The original *matatus* were covered pickup trucks which had three benches with people sitting facing one another. Therefore, they had to talk to each other, or at least make eye contact.

<sup>25</sup> For more on contextual theology, see Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

of running the parish. By this time it was populated by African Americans and people from various Latin American countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. The Irish population had moved out of the neighbourhood by the time the Jesuits took over the parish.<sup>26</sup> Throughout its history, St Patrick's parish has always been welcoming to people of different ethnicities. I, too, felt welcomed there as a newly arrived African student who was trying to find a place in the US ecclesial context.

During my time, the parish was about two-thirds Hispanic and a third African American. The two communities at St Patrick's worshipped separately. This was my first encounter with the idea of a 'shared parish', where people from different ethnicities worship in their own languages while having minimal interaction with members of the other language groups. Shared parishes occur in multi-ethnic contexts where racial and cultural communities use one worshipping space. Brett Hoover argues that the co-location of distinctness in a shared physical space creates a dynamic that suggests more than integration or mixing. It entails a renegotiation of resources, time, space, participation and leadership models. This level of interaction reflects a 'sharing' that has sociological implications and theological import. Viewed this way, 'the shared parish offers an alternative means of understanding cultural diversity beyond paradigms of multiculturalism and assimilation'.<sup>27</sup>

It was fascinating to witness such a shared parish in the USA because in Africa most parishes are homogeneous. Although tribal differences occur in African parishes, there is enough commonality between tribes at the level of culture and language that it is easy for churches to operate in homogenous ways. It is unimaginable in much of Africa to think of a shared parish in the US sense. The experience I had at St Patrick's widened my horizons about what it means to belong to a parish. Since globalisation, urbanisation and immigration continue to affect the whole world, I think some African parishes, especially in urban areas, may soon become 'shared parishes' like St Patrick's. I am glad that I learnt how to be a minister in such a context, in case I may be called to work in a shared parish in Africa.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed history of St Patrick's parish see Jeffrey Lewis, *After Changes Upon Changes: A Centennial History of St Patrick Parish* (Techny: Divine Word Missionaries, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> See Brett C. Hoover, *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of US Catholicism* (New York: NYUP, 2014).

My first encounter with Hispanic culture and spirituality was at St Patrick's. Even though I did not know Spanish, I was attracted to the Hispanic liturgies and how the Hispanic people are so devoted to the Church. The Hispanic community taught me the value of popular piety and devotion to Our Lady, which had not been a central part of my spirituality. The Hispanic parishioners' devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe transformed my relationship with Mary. There were two images of Our Lady in the church: one of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the other of Our Lady of Africa. Praying in that church reminded me how central Mary, as a mother figure, is to both communities. Our Lady continues to pray for the people of God whatever their ethnicity and race, and they all identify with her motherly care.

I was fascinated to see how the Hispanic community integrated their faith and culture. I first witnessed a *quinceañera* ceremony and the symbols that accompany it at St Patrick's. The *quinceañera* liturgy and the festivity afterwards are a celebration of a girl's transformation from girlhood to young adulthood.<sup>28</sup> In most parts of Africa, such cultural rites of passage are separated from the Church. Encountering the Hispanic community at St Patrick's I learnt that some African practices involving the initiation of boys and girls into adulthood, are also sacred and could be integrated into the church liturgy as a way of finding God in all things. The Hispanic people at St Patrick's taught me that faith and culture are not separate.

The African American community was also exuberant, with gospel music and a lot of dancing. The English Mass went on for two and a half, sometimes three, hours. That style of Mass was very different from what I was used to in Africa. I took a long time to get accustomed to the gospel songs and the long preaching. I learnt, as I continued to immerse myself in the black Catholic community at St Patrick's, that most black Catholics in America are converts, especially from the Baptist and other Protestant Churches, and they come to the Roman Catholic Church with their former worship styles. I was accustomed to long, lively liturgies in Africa, but those I experienced at West Oakland were different. I had to become inculturated in this new liturgical environment. The West Oakland context helped me discern how to be a minister who takes cultures seriously, that is, a minister who does 'culture-sensitive ministry'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See Julia Alvarez, *Once upon a Quinceañera: Coming of Age in America* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> See Kenneth McGuire, Eduardo Fernández and Anne Hansen, *Culture-Sensitive Ministry: Helpful Strategies for Pastoral Ministers* (New York: Paulist, 2010).

The two St Patrick's communities experienced some tensions, which are inevitable when two cultures meet. Learning to navigate cultural tensions yet remaining faithful to the message of Christ was an important lesson for me. As an outsider, I was alien to both the Hispanic and African American cultures, but I slowly learnt aspects of them through observation and interaction with the parishioners.

I was shocked by the fear I saw in the parish, in both communities, after the rise of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016. The xenophobia, white supremacy and exclusionary policies—such as the ban on people from certain Muslim countries entering the US—that undermine the dignity of minorities were disturbing. In one of my confirmation classes, I asked my Hispanic students what they wanted to change in their lives during Lent. One of them said, 'I would like to change Trump!' The immigration issue in the larger Bay Area, which is considered a sanctuary for immigrants, continued to baffle me. What could I do, as a foreigner who has no say in the policies of the country? The only response to my helplessness was to be in solidarity with the people in my church community who were threatened by unjust immigration laws.

However, despite the uncertainty and fear of deportation, there remained a sense of home and family in the parish; there was social support among people who would otherwise have nowhere to feel secure. It was common to see people eating together and enjoying lively conversations after Mass. A variety of Latin American foods were served: Salvadorean *popusa*, and Mexican *tacos* and *enchiladas* among others. I was happy to enjoy these foods, which I had never seen in my life before, with a people whose culture I was barely starting to understand. I felt a sense of togetherness and communion as we ate together.

I experienced black hospitality as I worked at St Patrick's, too. As an African, I brought with me the idea of Church-as-family which the African bishops desired for the Church in Africa after the First African Synod of 1994.<sup>30</sup> At St Patrick's I was able to see the family model of Church in practice. Community-building activities and initiatives, such as eating together, emphasizing the sign of peace during the Mass and so on, made the black community at St Patrick's a welcoming one to a person coming from Africa. I met some parishioners who travelled over fifty miles to come to the church because they felt that they belonged to

<sup>30</sup> See John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission towards the Year 2000* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1995), n. 63.





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St Patrick's—that was their home. I was enriched by the resilience of the black community and the value they placed on their culture even amidst the threat of exclusionary narratives and racism.

St Patrick's provided an opportunity for me to get out of the classroom at the Graduate Theological Union and experience what Vincent Donovan calls 'grassroots theology': a non-academic lived theology that comes from people's experience.<sup>31</sup> 'For whom am I doing theology?' was one of the fundamental questions that I asked myself, and the St Patrick community helped me to understand that I did not do theology for its own sake, but for the sake of the people of God. I also learnt, in a practical way, about collaborative ministry while at the parish. I noticed that in the US Church collaborative ministry between the laity and the clergy is given priority. Where I have worked as a Jesuit in Africa such collaborative ministry was not emphasized. Working at St Patrick's, I was able to see collaborative ministry up close and make it a ministerial skill that I would take back home to Africa. I learnt that laypeople are not subordinate to the clergy, but equal partners in the proclamation of the reign of God.

### ***Some Lessons from Both Worlds***

Even though people in South Sudan are poor, they share the little resources they have in the spirit of communalism. It was difficult to find

<sup>31</sup> See Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978).



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people living in destitution on the street. The people knew how to pull together and help those who are struggling. Witnessing homelessness in a country of abundance such as the United States shocked me. I could not understand how the country's great technological and economic advancement could coexist with the crisis of homelessness. I think US society can learn from developing countries such as South Sudan about the value of sharing.

During my stay in the United States, I had a chance to visit Red Cloud Indian School at Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Pine Ridge is located in Shannon County—one of the poorest counties in the United States.<sup>32</sup> Visiting the various churches where the Jesuits minister on the reservation made me think that I was not in the US any more. The poverty I saw there was comparable to what I saw in South Sudan. Even in parts of the wealthy USA, poverty is as endemic as it is in developing countries. I was inspired to see the solidarity of the Jesuits at Pine Ridge with the Oglala Lakota people. They were helping to break the vicious circle created by the injustices done to the native people over the centuries. I felt a deep connection to these Jesuits since they were working in conditions not unlike those in which I worked in South Sudan. Thousands of miles apart, on two different frontiers, Jesuits were living in solidarity with the poor.

While I was in South Sudan I was confronted by insecurity and gun violence because of the civil war. I had to rely on God's protection and stay out of harm's way as much as I could. Many local people lost their lives. When I arrived in West Oakland, however, gun violence was also a common occurrence. One night, a few months before I arrived there, a gang member had been shot a few blocks from St Patrick's parish, and his body lay where it fell until daylight. Such incidents in the Bay Area itself, and reports of gun violence in other parts of the US were frightening. Seeing violence in both South Sudan and the US taught me that God is the one who protects. Even in the wealthy and seemingly peaceful USA it is possible to die through a random act of violence. I learnt that wherever I am, trust in God's protection is what is important.

Things were always uncertain in South Sudan, and the predictability and precision of some things in the USA surprised me. Using the internet to get directions or phone apps to get real-time departure and arrival

<sup>32</sup> For details about the work of the Jesuits at Pine Ridge, see Ross Enochs, *The Jesuit Mission to the Lakota Sioux: A Study of Pastoral Ministry, 1886–1945* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996).

times for public transport was new to me. Where was divine providence in all that? It was difficult to see God's guiding hand when things were so predictable. I felt that predictability could tempt people to be too independent of one another, and too independent of God and God's action in the world. The mostly unpredictable life in South Sudan helped me to trust in God's providence.

Living alongside US Jesuits, I felt enriched culturally and challenged to think differently. But I think that my presence and that of other African Jesuits sharing our lives, culture and experience enriched the US Jesuits too. The experience of living in South Sudan and in the United States has helped me to appreciate the need for adaptability and flexibility in relation to the cultures that a Jesuit encounters. I learnt how to negotiate new cultures and manage culture shock, and about the challenges that both deprivation and abundance bring. I also learnt that frontiers are not only to be found in countries where there is material deprivation, but also in wealthy ones.

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