Review of For God and My Country: Catholic Leadership in Modern Uganda

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John Ashworth*

JJ Carney's insightful book lives up to its title. It presents a concise and readable overview of Church and state in Uganda, and six interesting and significant case studies of Catholics who have exercised leadership roles in the nation.

He chose Uganda as a microcosm of Africa, and perhaps also as an antidote to the tendency in Europe and north America to treat Africa as if it were a single country. While there are certainly some commonalities throughout the continent, better to look in detail at one country than try to conflate them all into a single discourse.

Carney deliberately avoided some of the more well-known Ugandan leaders, such as the towering figures of Archbishop Joseph Kiwanuka, Uganda's first indigenous bishop, and Archbishop John Baptist Odama, renowned for his peacebuilding activities in northern Uganda's conflicts. Instead, he highlights lesser known but no less important figures, including laity and women. Benedicto K M Kiwanuka was a Catholic layman and politician, the “patron saint of Ugandan politicians”, who fought for law and judicial independence. Emmanuel Cardinal Nsubuga, who famously said, “I am not for Catholics only; I am for you all”, demonstrated the politics of nonviolent resistance toward those who would attack the sheep. Fr John Mary Waliggo was an early proponent of African liberation theology. Sr Rose Mystica Muyinza demonstrated “solidarity on the streets”, an incarnational vision of God as one who, to paraphrase John 1:14, “pitched his tent with us”, speaking from the streets to transform the streets. Fr Tonino Pasolini, Sherry Meyer, and Radio Pacis, lived out a new role for missionaries in the post-colonial era, empowering the people through mass communications, and also modelling the role of lay missionaries. Rosalba Ato Oywa, “Mama Peace”, reminds Catholics that amidst their charitable relief, political activism or development work, they should not overlook the importance of social analysis, a recognition of the wider historical and social causes of conflict. What is notable about the laity amongst these Catholic leaders is the extent to which they made their impact outside church institutions, embodying Vatican II’s teaching that the primary mission for lay Catholics is to “contribute to the sanctification of the world” (p. 118).

But perhaps of more interest to a wider global readership, particularly at this time when there appear to be ever more polarising elements within the Church in the Global North, are Carney's reflections on an integrated model of Church, not divided into opposing “conservative” and “progressive”, “devotional” and “social doctrine” camps. As he says, “I am convinced that these leaders offer important pastoral lessons not just for Ugandans, but also for American Christians and other people of good will around the world” (p. 13) and thus, “[c]onvinced that American Christians can learn from their brothers and sisters in Africa, I intentionally frame these chapters dialogically between Uganda and the American context within which I live and work” (p. 23). Rather than the polarised culture wars of the USA, “the leaders profiled here share a holistic, liberative, and humanitarian approach to their grassroots apostolates in service to religiously pluralistic societies and the common good, broadly reflecting core principles of Catholic social teaching and the social mission of the Second Vatican Council” (p. 10).
However, “a twofold commitment to both the church and the nation [is] a delicate balancing act that involved seeking public influence and retaining working relationships with state leaders, yet also striving to maintain political independence... these leaders work within institutions, yet often find themselves pushing up against institutional boundaries, whether of church, state, or society... to 'respond and belong to the gap’” (p.10). Prophets are not always welcomed within their own communities! At the same time, “faithful service on behalf of the world necessitates a deep grounding in spirituality, sacrament, and Catholic practice... these Ugandan leaders demonstrate that, at its best, deepened Catholic religious identity will lead to a broader “catholic' commitment to the whole world” (p.10).

Carney explores how their Catholicism drives and is integrated into their public leadership. In the Church in Africa can be found very traditional Catholic piety (daily mass, Marian devotion, rosary, eucharistic adoration and processions, veneration of saints, etc) and moral theology (on abortion, homosexuality, etc) side by side with a deep commitment to community and social justice as currently expressed in Catholic Social Teaching. Carney concludes that there is no contradiction, no dichotomy; it can be both/and rather than either/or. He also shows how these leaders make the Church present in society without attempting to impose theocracy. Effective Christian witness and proclamation is through action, love and service, not through trying to give Christian doctrine a privileged place in society. One is reminded of a saying attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, “Preach the Gospel constantly. Use words [only] when necessary”. “[T]hese leaders’ public apostolates demonstrate how the Church can be a sacrament given for the life of the world, embodying Vatican II’s call for the Church to be ‘a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among people.’ In other words, the Church points not to itself but to the 'already-but-not-yet' reign of God inaugurated in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ” (p.10). Being a faithful Catholic in the world does not imply Catholic apologetics nor imposing theocracy or Christian nationalism.

Carney echoes Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole in exploring the “social performance' of Catholicism through a biographical lens” (p.24). The concept of narrative or story is very significant in African cultures, and one thinks of Rwandan theologian Marcel Uwineza who uses his own personal story to reflect on theology after the Rwandan genocide; indeed Uwineza states that he was inspired by Carney's work to write his own biographical theology iv, and Carney wrote the epilogue to that work.

The final chapter highlights five key lessons embodied in the six Ugandan “stories”: (1) Embodying Long-Term Solidarity with the Poor and Marginalised; (2) Pursuing a Charismatic Vision within an Institutional Framework; (3) Empowering Others through Servant-Leadership; (4) Seeking Truth and Justice with the Self-Sacrificial Spirit of the Martyrs; and (5) The More “Catholic,” the More “catholic”': The Ambivalence of the Catholic Common Good Mission.

Finally, the leaders profiled by Carney “embody modern Catholic social teaching’s emphasis on service to the common good. Since Vatican II, Church politics has moved away from the antimodern and 'defending Catholic interests' postures so characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries v, and toward a constructive and collaborative engagement with modernity in
service to the common people” as they “worked for the national common good and downplayed Catholic particularity” (p.134).

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References


Endnotes

i A sentiment echoed many years later by southern Sudanese Catholic Archbishop Paolino Lukudu Loro and his Anglican counterpart Joseph Marona who, while often having to travel out of their dioceses in search of peace, jointly said, “Juba needs an archbishop. Whichever one of us is in Juba at any time is the archbishop for all the Christians, regardless of denomination”; Ashworth, 2014, p21.


iii Carney's statement that “liberation theology originated through the work of scholars, bishops, and local Christian communities in Latin America” (59) may raise some hackles in Africa, but he goes on to qualify it by referring to early examples of indigenous African liberation theologies in South and West Africa. An early precursor of liberation theology can be found in the words of a young protestant pastor in Sudan in the 1960s: “I will preach freedom from oppression rather than from sin”; Ashworth, 2022, p12. Carney also makes the important distinction that the oppression experienced in Africa was more to do with colonialism and culture, “namely how to retrieve the insights of traditional African culture after a century of European colonial repression—than with questions of sociopolitical liberation” in Latin America (60-61). And while Carney cites Joseph Healey in stating that “the African model of 'Small Christian Communities' tended to be much more devotional and apolitical than their Latin American counterparts”, I would interpret Healey as strongly maintaining that African Small Christian Communities, like African liberation theology, developed independently of Latin American ones, and not as a result of them.

iv Uwineza, 2022.

v And, one might add, amongst self-styled Catholic “traditionalists” in the culture war in twenty first century USA.