

**African Political Theology of Hope: The
Eucharist as the Paradigmatic Context *for the
Politics of Memory***

By

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Abstract

Political theologies from the later decades of the 20th century have aimed to explore the nature of political agency beyond the conventional structures of nation-states and how effectively it can operate. Christians are encouraged to uphold and cherish the memories of the deceased—specifically martyrs—as a vital form of political agency in contemporary society. It is argued that the memories of slain relatives and fellow Christians can transcend feelings of pain, anger, and the desire for revenge, igniting hope and courage in the face of suffering. This essay draws on the submissions of Emmanuel Katongole, who suggests that the “practice of lament” can ignite that fire in us, as a Church, in the struggle against social injustice, violence, and exploitation in Africa. Accordingly, Katongole asserts that we must honor the memories of our African martyrs through feasts, celebrations, and similar acts in our fight against violence and injustice in Africa.

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While this essay acknowledges Katongole's recommendations, it posits that these feasts and festivals—serving as a means of preserving the memories of martyrs—should be given an ecclesial dimension or nuance and be celebrated within the context of the Eucharistic meal. It contends that the Eucharist imparts a universal significance to the memories of the martyrs, transcending geographical boundaries to make these memories “our memories,” regardless of the martyrs' origins. Therefore, it is essential to encourage unity and foster a sense of “family” among Christians. Otherwise, these memories will remain confined to an ethnic group, without creating a broader impact that extends beyond geographical limits. Thus, it concludes that within the context of the Eucharist, we can transcend our differences and share our memories, “Jews and Greeks alike.”

Keywords: Eucharist, Memory (*Memoria*), Martyrs, Church, Solidarity, Katongole.

Can we find hope in an endless cycle of violence or hopelessness, and despair? Can lament inspire hope and resilience? Can the memory of slain kin produce anything but pain, anger, and a desire for revenge? These questions continuously haunt the African continent, which suffers from poverty, disease, violence, and oppression. These realities instill helplessness and hopelessness in their people. There is “overwhelming suffering” occasioned by the complex history of violence and oppression that shrouds the continent. Consequently, Emmanuel Kantogole, in his book *Born to Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, argues that “the practice of lament” ignites hope amidst suffering and courage to confront the challenges posed by suffering. The Christian does this in dialogue

with God, by choosing the way of Christ, who in suffering and death chose peace. In Chapter 13, *Refusing to be Consoled for the Death of the Martyrs*, Kantongole asserts that the memories of martyrs' suffering can "transform the experience of personal and communal suffering and tragedy into energy, commitment, and advocacy for a nonviolent alternative"² because Christ chose peace and not revenge. He further asserts that we must keep these memories alive by "naming them". Furthermore, Kantongole avers that we can keep these memories alive through "vigils, the celebration of feast days, assuming martyrs' names, storytelling, and so on."³

I find Katongole's views very compelling and strongly affirm that these memories can help the community stand resolute against injustice and oppression, and should be kept alive. Although his context was East Africa, his concerns pervade the whole continent of Africa. Kantongole's "practice of lament" works practically to keep the community awake by living a life of "vigilance and nonviolent struggle." Accordingly, Katongole suggests ways to preserve the memories of martyrs. I argue that these modes of remembrance would not provide a universal model of preserving these memories amongst Christians, unless it is done in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy. The memories of martyrs, as long as they remain within the confines of the locality, i.e., socio-cultural boundaries, will not foster the solidarity that the Eucharist brings to the group, where oppression to one is oppression to all. In a continent as diverse as Africa, with divisions in almost every sphere of life, I submit that remembering our

² Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament : The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017). p. xiii.

³ Katongole, 259.

martyrs in the Eucharist will make their memory have a far-reaching influence among Christians, especially Catholics, in Africa, in the resolve to stand against oppression.

Consequently, this write-up employs the idea of Johann Baptist Metz that the “Christian faith articulates itself as a *memoria passionis, mortis, et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*”,⁴ which we reenact in the context of the Eucharist, the memorial of the paschal mysteries that bought us salvation. Metz, it should be noted, does not explicitly use the word “Eucharist”; I use it to claim that the memories of the sufferings of martyrs would be symbolically meaningful to the Church if we name and remember them in the context of Eucharistic Fellowship. The memories are, thus, not restricted to the geographical setting but become the memories of the Church in Africa. In the long run, this will foster communion beyond ethnic and tribal boundaries and challenge the oppression, violence, and injustice fueled by tribalism and ethnocentrism. Thus, politics of memory can be a source of hope and a force for political agency in Africa, in the endless cycle of violence, poverty, and despair, when we unite as one and speak with one voice. One of the reasons we are unable to hold onto memories that define and shape our history is the lack of unity. Therefore, we must model our lament and memory to that of the Eucharistic feast that unites us many into one body – the body of Christ.

The Danger of Suppressing Memories

The importance of preserving the history of any country, society, or group is the identity it gives. In 2009, late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua removed History from the education

⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 107.

curriculum. It is claimed that students avoided the course because there were few jobs for history graduates.⁵ However, 13 years later, in 2022, the government reintroduced the subject. Speaking at the inaugural ceremony, the Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu, avows:

This single act no doubt relegated and eroded the knowledge and information that learners could otherwise have been exposed to. It was a monumental mistake, and we have already started seeing the negative consequences. The loss created by the absence of this subject has led to a fall in moral values, erosion of civic values, and a disconnect from the past.⁶

Speaking further on the issue, President Olusegun Obasanjo opines, “I have given myself the task of working with some people to keep the slave trade alive in our history. We must not allow anyone to say the slave trade is not a true story, and we must keep it on the front burner.”⁷ Losing our memories of suffering “is like losing one’s memory; it will be a disaster. I don’t know where we got it from. Some people feel there is an aspect of the history we don’t want to hear”.⁸ It is the tension between things we want to hear and things we do not want to hear that threatens and challenges us to be the force for good and change in the

⁵ “Nigerian Government Reintroduces History in Basic Education Curriculum after 13 Years’ Break,” accessed December 14, 2024, <https://saharareporters.com/2022/11/24/nigerian-government-reintroduces-history-basic-education-curriculum-after-13-years-break>.

⁶ “Nigerian Government Reintroduces History in Basic Education Curriculum after 13 Years’ Break.”

⁷ Ifeanyi Onuba, “Removal of History from Nigeria’s Education System A Disaster- Obasanjo,” June 2, 2024, <https://thewhistler.ng/removal-of-history-from-nigerias-education-curriculum-a-huge-disaster-obasanjo/>.

⁸ Onuba.

struggle for peace. The lives of the martyrs, whose memories of suffering we commemorate constantly, remind us of our true call and identity as champions of peace in a violent world.⁹

We are in danger of losing the memories of suffering that tell our stories and define who we are as African Christians, especially when we repress and do not “name them”. As Africans, we must find ways to preserve the memories of suffering of our brothers and sisters who showed tremendous courage in the face of oppression. According to Katongole, “in remembering the martyrs, the Church celebrates the lives of men and women who have lived in an exemplary way and have paid the ultimate sacrifice as living witnesses—that is, as witnesses who are, though dead, still with us.”¹⁰ In addition, Kantongole opines that to appreciate the hope martyrs represent, we should practice naming them and going further to remember their lives in the form of “vigils, feast days, taking up their names, and storytelling.”¹¹ Emmanuel Kantongole does not explicitly mention the Eucharist in his submission; rather, he speaks of Liturgical Celebrations. There are varied liturgical celebrations in the Church, but the Eucharist is the most “august” of all because other celebrations can be done in the context of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist: Paradigmatic Memorial

The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, according to Canon 897, “is the most august sacrament in which Christ the Lord Himself is contained, offered, and received and by which the

⁹ Katongole, *Born from Lament : The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, 259.

¹⁰ Katongole, 245.

¹¹ Katongole, 259.

Church continually grows”.¹² It is the most revered and most important sacrament in the life of the Church. In the Eucharist, we celebrate the memorial of Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection into glory. This is the sacrifice that grounds our Christian faith as Catholics. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest proclaims that which humans cannot give, that which today is arguably absent in Africa, i.e., PEACE. Peace is “the new reality that comes to us from God, in Christ, and that is more than just words and intentions. The Eucharist is peace from the Lord”.¹³ Consequently, our faith in the real presence of God in the Eucharist renews our hope and brings peace into our lives in communion with one another. It is, therefore, not surprising that at the end of every Eucharistic celebration, the priest says to the people, “Go in the peace of Christ” or “Go in peace”, and the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God”.

Accordingly, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) avers that the Christian faith is a “Peace Movement”. In his book, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, Ratzinger avers:

At the beginning of Christian history, the faithful were a marginal group, potentially insignificant. They themselves were unable to actively participate in shaping public policy on any matter. Nonetheless, the peace of Christ was not merely an inner peace and not merely a future peace... In each Eucharistic assembly, what happened on the evening of Easter Day was repeated for them. The Risen One came in among his disciples and spoke to them: Peace be with you (Jn.

¹² *Code of Canon Law*, Latin-English edition., Codex Iuris Canonici (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983). Can. 897.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is near Us : The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, Eucharist, the Heart of Life (San Francisco: : Ignatius Press, 2003), 116–17.

20:19) ...Here they met with the new sphere of peace that faith had opened up—the reconciliation of slaves and free men, Greeks and barbarians, of Jews and gentile (cf. Gal 3:28). Here they who were deeply divided one from another in the framework of society of that time were at one, were indeed one single person—the new man, Jesus Christ, who based on the Father’s love bound them all together (cf. Gal 3:17, 28).¹⁴

From the foregoing, the peace the Eucharist brings transcends all boundaries and limits because people from all corners of the world are brought into a table fellowship, where everyone is welcomed.¹⁵ This life of communion was so evident in the community of the early Christians. Thus when the people saw how they lived in communion, sharing things, and being distinct from other groups, they called them *Christians* (cf. Acts 11:19-20). At the Table of Fellowship, we become family, “Jews and Greeks alike” (cf. Romans 10:12). St Paul uses that phrase to emphasize that there is no distinction, and all are equal before God. The early Christians formed a bond that sent a clear message to the people outside the group, a bond created and sustained by celebrating the Eucharist. “It was with the inmost element of faith, with the Eucharistic assembly, that the early Christians thus did something politically most significant; they created spheres of peace and built, as it were, high roads of peace through a world of strife.”¹⁶ This is why the Eucharist is the paradigmatic mode for naming martyrs and uniting the people of God.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, 117–18.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, 118.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, 118.

In addition, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus* (On the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace) affirms that “The Eucharist is the force which brings together the scattered children of God and maintains them in communion, ‘since in our veins there circulates the very Blood of Christ, who makes us children of God, members of God’s Family’.”¹⁷ This, according to him, is the very “antithesis of division, tribalism, racism and ethnocentrism.”¹⁸ Accordingly, we must transcend tribal and ethnic boundaries to build a community of love and peace, and together we would be firm to withstand strife and challenge the *status quo*. According to William Spohn, “solidarity challenges any tendency to establish our relational identity by identifying exclusively with a finite community. If we over-identify with one community, even a particular church, we tend to become defensive about rival communities.”¹⁹ Thus, solidarity with those who are not in our circle or community stands against this defensiveness that crops up from time to time. Solidarity here should be understood as that principle that transcends economic, political, and cultural divisions.²⁰ Therefore, the solidarity the Eucharistic meal creates “implies solidarity with those who are oppressed, because the scandal of the rich Christians feasting at the Corinthian gatherings while others went hungry so violated the solidarity intrinsic to the Eucharist that Paul told them they were

¹⁷ Pope Benedict, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae Munus of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), §41.

¹⁸ Pope Benedict, §41.

¹⁹ William C Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise : Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 180.

²⁰ Spohn, 180.

performing a travesty.”²¹ This is why I argue that, for the Church in Africa, faced with economic, political, and ethnic divisions, grounding the memory of our martyrs in the Eucharist makes their memories of suffering our collective memories, not bound to a particular place but in communion with other places. In this solidarity, the oppression faced by one is the oppression faced by all. This is the type of solidarity that “takes practical form to rectify the structure of injustice.”²² The violence and killings are perpetrated by Africans against fellow Africans because we have not learned to see each other as brothers and sisters.

The maxim *lex orandi, lex credenda* (the norm of prayer is the norm of belief) was made primarily concerning the liturgy. This is true because we learn about our identity as Christians when we participate in the Eucharist, where the mystery of our salvation is reenacted, the context in which the Gospel is proclaimed, reflected on, and appropriated.²³ Accordingly, Sandra Schneiders asserts that “it is not insignificant that the Second Vatican Council’s first act in the task of renewing the Church was not the refurbishing of doctrine but the renewal of the Liturgy,”²⁴ i.e., *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy). It is in the context of the Liturgy of the Eucharist that our salvation story is told and retold, and Tradition is handed on from generation to generation. Our redemption story shapes our faith in the same way, and the memories of martyrs shape our lives in the face of challenges and prepare us for the glory that lies beyond. Yes, the

²¹ Spohn, 182.

²² Spohn, 181.

²³ Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 79.

²⁴ Schneiders, 79.

glory that lies beyond, because in the Eucharistic assembly, “we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims”.²⁵ Hence, “the celebration of the memory of the Last Supper (Eucharist) grounds a life of renewed hope until we drink from the cup at the messianic banquet.”²⁶

Furthermore, the question of the universal and ecclesial dimension of *Memoria* is evident in the debate between two African theologians, Benezet Bujo and Paulinus Odozor, on the problem of African ethics. On one hand, Benezet Bujo, in his book, *Foundation of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claim of Western Morality*, asserts that “it is only in the context of a ‘morality of *memoria*’ that we can fully grasp the problem of African ethics.”²⁷ It is established within the framework of *anamnesis* that is grounded in fellowship with those who are yet unborn and those who have gone before us, in the ancestors; “for one who takes anamnesis seriously is challenged to confront the ethical rules drawn up by the ancestors, to actualize anew the ‘protological foundational act’ which acts as the clan fellowship.”²⁸ Bujo insists that anamnesis is an imperative for African ethics because it is through such *memoria* that the deeds and traditions of the ancestors are kept alive, in solidarity with them, thereby ensuring a continuity between the past and

²⁵ “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum,” in *Vatican II*, 1965.

²⁶ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise : Jesus and Ethics*, 180.

²⁷ Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic : Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Crossroad Pub., 2001), 34.

²⁸ Bujo, 35.

present.²⁹ On the other hand, Paulinus Odozor, in his criticism of Bujo, avows:

African ethics must be anamnestic in a more inclusive way. It must be an ethic that begins with remembering Jesus, his teaching, and his deeds. Further, this ethic must also take seriously the teaching of Jesus' disciples and those other members of the community of Jesus who, through the centuries in every part of the world have kept the memory of Jesus alive. In other words, for the Christian, anamnesis is primarily an ecclesial affair...The Church is the place in which the memory of Jesus has been kept alive all these centuries.³⁰

Bujo's insistence that anamnesis keeps alive the memory and deeds of ancestors will appeal to any African because to be an ancestor is analogous to being a saint in the Church. Africans venerate their ancestors and seek their assistance and protection against evil forces. The lives of the ancestors are models for the living to persevere and conquer the vicissitudes of life. Thus, in the words of J. S Mbiti, they are called "the living dead".

Nonetheless, it is important to note that ancestors are ancestors of clans, tribes, or ethnic groups. The *memoria* of ancestors can be referred to simply as "culture-particular."³¹

²⁹ Emmanuel Katongole, "Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations by PaulinusIkechukwu Odozor, C.S.Sp. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), Xii + 371 Pp," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 3 (2016): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12269>.

³⁰ Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African : Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations* (Notre Dame, Indiana: a : University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 269.

³¹ By "culture-particular" I intend to say, that the memories of ancestors are relevant to cultures of certain people for whom the individual is an ancestor. Ancestors do not really carry the weight of "universal" figures.

Hence, Bujo's conception does not give *anamnesis* a universal undertone but a subjective one. Such *memoria* are limited to a particular group and would not evoke the same emotions for anyone outside the clan, tribe, or ethnic group. Therefore, a *memoria* of this kind does not challenge us, as Africans, but the group for whom the ancestors are valued. The danger, as we observe today in Africa, is that in such exclusivism, where Africans do not share any *memoria* that binds them together, people easily stay aloof while other people suffer violence and oppression. This could be the reason, though my personal and unverified opinion, why genocide (ethnic cleansing) and other forms of violence go on in parts of the continent, and the rest go about their business. For instance, Christians are killed in numbers in the Northern part of Nigeria, and many Christians in the Southern part of Nigeria do not think it is our collective problem because it happened in the North. In particular, the kidnapping and murder of Mr. Michael Nnadi, a seminarian of Igbo extraction living in Northern Nigeria, should be an eye-opener.

What is left of his memory? Maybe within his diocese, and not even within the dioceses in the North, is his memory preserved. What is left of the memories of all the priests who were gruesomely murdered in different parts of Nigeria and Africa at large? We have grotesquely developed the defense mechanism of a temporary show of pain and regret, whilst moving on too quickly and resigning to accept the worst. It is sad to note that this attitude is not one of docility but of cowardice. There is a lack of solidarity with the death of a fellow Christian who suffers in places not known or not socially affiliated with us. It is all fun and games until it hits home. There is a lack of solidarity because "finite communities have become the exclusive source of value and

meaning in the name of loyalty.”³² Has the Catholic Church in Nigeria, in any way, preserved this memory and, indeed, the memories of all Catholics who lost their lives bearing witness to Christ? Have the memories of those slain in different parts of Nigeria been made the memory of the Church in Nigeria, beyond the places where their killing occurred?

Accordingly, in some of the instances given by Emmanuel Kantongole, remarkably about the Rwandan genocide, the over 5.4 million people killed in the war in DRC Congo,³³ and the forty seminarians, their memories have not gone beyond the socio-cultural and political boundaries where they occurred. On the other hand, the memories of the Martyrs of Uganda, who were canonized and whose memorial was incorporated into the Eucharistic Liturgy of the Church, transcend the boundaries of Uganda, with far greater influence across the continent. United in faith and communion with the whole Church, we remember and keep their memories alive. Thus, Kantongole rightly affirms that “in a world marked by the deep divisions of racial, national, and ethnic loyalties, martyrs point to a communion that cuts across these boundaries.”³⁴ The boundaries include earthly boundaries because the martyrs give the Church an eschatological identity, and as a resurrected community, the martyrs’ agency transcends the boundaries of geography and time.³⁵

Consequently, the memories of martyrs will be best enacted in the context of the Eucharistic meal, giving it an ecclesial, and thus universal, dimension by calling the whole

³² Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise : Jesus and Ethics*, 180.

³³ Katongole, *Born from Lament : The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, 252.

³⁴ Katongole, 256.

³⁵ Katongole, 256.

Church to lament and to action. The suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, enacted each time we celebrate the Eucharist, give meaning and hope to the lives and memories of martyrs. In other words, and the context of the Eucharist, the “memory of the crucified Lord stands at the heart of our faith and forms the basis of the promise of freedom that will come for everyone.”³⁶ The eschatological truth and this promise of freedom cannot be derived from history, but as Gustavo Gutierrez affirms, this freedom “begins in history, but becomes a way to the fullness that lies beyond it.”³⁷ It implies then that in the history of humanity, “suffering does not belong simply to the prehistory of freedom, but that it is and will continue to be an inner moment of the history of freedom.”³⁸ Hence, the martyrs’ memories are memories of hope. The Eucharist embodies this message of hope and peace. Therefore, in the context of the paradigmatic Eucharistic Meal, we can name our martyrs and preserve their memories of suffering, and rekindle our hope in the eternal redemption brought through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, which gives meaning to our present sufferings.

The Way Forward: Naming the Martyrs, Canonized or Not Canonized

Emmanuel Katongole offered various suggestions on how we can keep the memories of the martyrs. The modes Katongole recommended for keeping the memories of martyrs alive are great;

³⁶ Metz, *Faith in History and Society : Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, 107.

³⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Essential Writings*, ed. James B Nickoloff (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 212.

³⁸ Metz, *Faith in History and Society : Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, 108.

however, I think they limit the memories of martyrs to the socio-cultural milieu. The context of Eucharistic Liturgy gives their memory a universal and ecclesial dimension that makes their lives exemplary to all Africans, irrespective of location, thereby fostering the ecclesiology of the Church as the 'Family of God'. In *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI avows that "the family is the best setting for learning and applying the culture of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation, because 'in family life we experience some of the fundamental elements of peace: justice and love between brothers and sisters...' for this reason, the family is the first and indispensable teacher of peace."³⁹ When we realize that those we are killing are our brothers and sisters, irrespective of where they come from, it will heighten our sense of unity and solidarity to fight the violence that is socialized on the continent. Consequently, the Eucharist gives us that common identity as agents of peace and hope. Until the Church, in Africa, incorporates these memories of sufferings in the context of the Eucharist, as reflections of Christ's sufferings, we may not "develop any goals and priorities"⁴⁰ as a people and family of God, thus "becoming more and more anonymous and subjectless."⁴¹

I guess that Kantongole is perhaps concerned about the fact that naming these African martyrs within the context of the Eucharist, when they are not formally canonized, would appear to be overreaching. The fact is that the rigorous formal processes of canonization, with all the financial exigencies, put African

³⁹ Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae Munus of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, 43.

⁴⁰ Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, 108.

⁴¹ Metz, 108.

Catholics in a disadvantaged position. This is, for me, the main reason the Church in Africa has lost the memories of martyrs and their history, as their memories remain localized.⁴² We celebrate the memories of martyrs and saints whose lives are worth emulating. Many of these martyrs and saints are from Europe and other parts of the world. Nonetheless, their memories are our memories in the spirit of solidarity. We even bear their names at baptism, which has also proven to be a veritable means of preserving their memories. The same cannot be said about the array of courageous men and women who have borne witness in Nigeria and Africa at large. The crux of the matter is that these martyrs are yet to be recognized, thus making their way into the Roman canon. Nonetheless, I am thinking of life outside the stringent and arduous canonical process of recognition of saints, because for as long as many are not canonized in Africa, their memories are dangerously lost to the ecclesial community in Africa. What can we do as particular churches, within the wider universal communion, to preserve the memory of our heroes?

The Canon law, to the best of my knowledge, has not prescribed canons preventing particular churches from naming and honoring martyrs who are not canonized. Most of the popular devotions we have today in the Catholic Church began in the communities and societies where these saints lived, and gradually they spread. The onus lies on the Bishops, who meet regularly on continental and regional levels, to creatively find ways to celebrate our martyrs, canonized or not. Not all saints will make it to the Roman Canon; thus, if we can celebrate and name our loved

⁴² By “localize”, I mean that the memories remain in the geographical location of the martyrdom, and as such the memories do not create a common identity for Africans. Their memories do not cross socio-cultural boundaries.

one in the context of the Eucharist at their passing from this life, I think having a collective memorial of our martyrs, as a particular Church, does not impinge on ecclesiastical laws.

In addition, the Church had organized synods for the Church in Africa, and issues regarding canonization, I think, have not been decisively handled. It is worth mentioning here that the Rwandan genocide, “one of the worst humanitarian tragedies of modern times,” started in April 1994. Coincidentally, in April 1994, the same month and year, the Church convened the Synod of African Catholic Bishops in Rome.⁴³ The summary of the Synod’s reflections was issued fifteen years later in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, and according to Jay J. Carney, “no explicit mention is made in this document concerning the African tragedy that shadowed the Synod throughout its duration.”⁴⁴ The question is, are the heroic acts of witnessing by many Rwandans who protected and even died with their brothers and sisters not thought worthy of mention?

The good news, however, is that *Ecclesia in Africa* took the issue of Christian identity seriously, as Roger Cardinal Etchegaray avers that the Apostolic Exhortation looks for “the waters of Baptism to flow deeper than the blood of tribalism.”⁴⁵ In terms of ecclesia identity, John Paul II emphasizes the Catholicity of the Global Church, where the spirit of the Gospel leads us “to overcome cultural and nationalistic barriers, avoiding

⁴³ Jay j. Carney, “Waters of Baptism, Blood of Tribalism?,” in *African Ecclesia Review* (Roman Catholic Section American Academy Regional Annual Meeting, USA, 2006), 9.

⁴⁴ Carney, 9.

⁴⁵ Kritzinger, J.J “The Rwandan Tragedy as Public indictment of Christian Mission,” *Missionalia* 24:3, 1996, p. 345.

all isolationism.”⁴⁶ Therefore, remembering, telling, and retelling the stories and memories of martyrs in the Eucharistic feast—canonized or not canonized—the countless number of courageous men and women who died for the sake of peace and justice, will give the Church in Africa a common identity and purpose as one family of God, to stand firm against varied forms of social injustice, violence, and exploitation. Indeed, as one, bound together in love, the Church in Africa will be the authentic sacrament of reconciliation, justice, peace, and hope in Africa today. We should name our martyrs, tell their stories, and cherish their memories because symbolically naming our martyrs in the Eucharist will strengthen solidarity and communion in the Church in Africa and “set the agenda for the Church’s performance in the world.”⁴⁷

In one of her famous poems, titled *Threatened with Resurrection*, Julia Esquivel spoke about the endless and needless killing of her people in Guatemala. She writes:

It is something within us that doesn't let us sleep,
that doesn't let us rest,
that won't stop pounding deep inside,
It is the silent, warm weeping of Indian women
without their husbands,
it is the sad gaze of the children fixed somewhere
beyond memory,
Precious in our eyes, which during sleep, though
closed, keep watch, systole, diastole, awake. Now,
six have left us, and
nine in Rabinal, and two, plus two, plus two,

⁴⁶ Carney, “Waters of Baptism, Blood of Tribalism?,” 23.

⁴⁷ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, 184.

and ten, a hundred, a thousand,
 a whole army witness our pain,
 our fear,
 our courage,
 our *hope*!
 What keeps us from sleeping
 is that they have threatened us with
 Resurrection!⁴⁸

Accordingly, Julia Esquivel reminds us that “those slain not only witness to the pain of those still alive, but to their memory keeps them (the living) from sleeping and ‘threatens’ them with resurrection.”⁴⁹ It is the living who are threatened, just as the souls of all our slain brothers and sisters, whose memories are in danger of being forgotten, threaten us. Their memories will constantly inspire us as a Church united in an unbreakable bond of love and peace. Their courage, perseverance, and resoluteness propel us in our journey as pilgrims on earth— “they also *threaten* us with resurrection, and they constantly invite the Church into a life vigil, to a life of social struggle, and a new and resurrected community.”⁵⁰ In Nigeria, the souls of all Christians who were murdered in cold blood by the Boko Haram terrorists, the priests, religious, and seminarians killed in captivity, threaten us. What remains of their memory? Do their pains and miseries not mean anything to us? Their memories are but a gift to the Church because they inspire hope, and “in so doing the Church is drawn

⁴⁸ Julia Esquivel, “They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection,” *Spiritus* 3, no. 1 (2003): 97.

⁴⁹ Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, 245.

⁵⁰ Katongole, 245.

into three critical practices in the search for peace in the world: vigilance, social struggle, and resurrected living.”⁵¹

Conclusion

This write-up started by posing questions about the importance of martyrs and how their memories keep us standing firm in the face of suffering and injustice. Emmanuel Kantongole affirms that their memories lead to faith activism that can “transform the experience of personal and communal suffering and tragedy into energy, commitment, and advocacy for nonviolent alternatives”.⁵² Their lives have created communities of hope. He goes further to say that we should name them to keep their memories alive. In agreeing with Emmanuel Kantongole’s position, of naming, I employed the insight of Jean Baptist Metz that the Christian faith articulates itself in the context of the memory of the crucified Lord, to claim that naming the martyrs should be done in the context of the Eucharist, where their sufferings reflect the passion of Christ, giving it a universal and eschatological dimensions, that transcend social boundaries. Although Metz did not explicitly mention the Eucharist in his submission, I argued that the Eucharist is the paradigmatic memory of suffering, grounded in that of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we reenact the memory of the crucified Lord and celebrate the memories of suffering in that context, we make the martyrs’ memories, the memories of the universal Church as a community of hope, bound together in communion by Christ’s ultimate suffering, death, and resurrection. Thus keeping the memories of

⁵¹ Katongole, 247.

⁵² Katongole, *Born from Lament : The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*. p. xiii.

martyrs alive beyond their socio-cultural and political boundaries. Will the Church in Africa move for a review of canonical processes to sainthood? Will the Bishops in Africa work together to create a collective *memoria* for African martyrs? What practical measures can be put in place to alleviate the rigorous canonical processes? Why should the process of recognizing martyrs carry such a financial burden? These questions, for which I have no concrete answers, bug my mind. I hope we work hard now, rather than later, to preserve the martyrs' memories of suffering, for the good of the Church, and indeed the continent of Africa. May the souls of our martyrs “sleep without rest in our memories to warn us away”⁵³ from slumber and inactivity in this time of growing concerns on the African continent.

⁵³ Ibekwe Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite* (New York: Random House, 1975), 54.