Christ-Our-Guest: A Liturgical Adaptation of Guest Christology

Emmanuel OROBATOR, S.J.

Several attempts have been made by African theologians to formulate christological models for African Christianity. In the preceding issue we published a brief survey of these christological models, pointing out as one of their deficiencies the lack of a pastoral dimension. This article attempts to remedy this deficiency by constructing a christological ritual based on Guest Christology and the African understanding of guest. We would be interested in hearing from our readers on the applicability and suitability of this liturgical adaptation.

Introduction

The pastoral and liturgical adaptation of African christological models remains an on-going challenge to christologists. My growing conviction is that the absence of this pastoral dimension leads to what could be designated as a christological imbalance: African christologists create a myriad of models of the African Christ, but neglect the equally imposing necessity to develop a pastoral and liturgical adaptation of these models. The general consensus among African christologists, that Christ has remained a stranger to the majority of African Christians, is not unconnected with this christological imbalance. This same concern was echoed in the African Synod, notably in the interventions of several African bishops.

1. Guest Christology

Guest Christology holds that Jesus Christ is primarily a guest in Africa, and the early missionary style of evangelization cut for him the image of an alien who invalidates with impunity the traditional beliefs of Africans, and causes a rupture of their world-view. The consequence of this is that African Christians find it unfeasible to reconcile their traditional way of being with their profession of Christian faith.

In Guest Christology, Jesus Christ comes as an unpretentious guest, seeking time and space to dwell in the midst of the African Christians who welcome him into their home, where he undergoes a process of cultural initiation leading to his acceptance and proclamation as the head of

2. In elaborating this liturgical adaptation, I take a cue from previous attempts by some African theologians to propose liturgical rites proper to the African way of being Christians. Notable among these attempts is that of Dr. Peter W. Mpagi, who suggests a "service" for the "departed," in his article, "The Theology of Departed and a Suggested Service," in ACS, vol. 5, #3, Sept., 1989, 43-67.

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To resolve this quandary I see the need for a concrete program for outculturing the person and the message of Jesus Christ in the lives of African Christians. One way of going about this is to adopt the existing christological models liturgically.

My aim in this essay is to propose an experimental liturgical adaptation of Guest Christology. I begin with a succinct presentation of this christological model and, secondly, outline a liturgy or rite of initiating and welcoming Christ-as-Guest into the African family. Finally, I conclude with an examination and explanation of some of the advantages and theological elements of this approach.

1.0. Guest Christology

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In Guest Christology, Jesus Christ comes as an unpretentious guest, seeking time and space to dwell in the midst of the African Christians who welcome him into their home, where he undergoes a process of cultural initiation leading to his acceptance and proclamation as the head of...
the household, that is, the redeemer and the "authenticate of the African
way of life."4

As a guest, Christ is sent by his Father and our Father; the Father the
Africans worship and revere as the Creator and Originator of all life. It is
this same Father who raises Christ to the fullness of life in the Spirit, and
constitutes him Lord of the entire universe and, therefore, of each African
family which welcomes him. Since a guest is traditionally a source of
blessing, Christ-Our-Guest also brings gifts of fullness of life from the Fa-
ther and invites all believers to share in these gifts in the Spirit, as one
family with the Family of God.

The question to be asked here is: How is this process of cultural initia-
tion translated into real life without it remaining a mere theological jug-
glery or hollow disquisition? In other words, how can Guest Christology
be adapted liturgically?

2.0. Elements of the Rite of Cultural Initiation

It is important to emphasize the qualification 'cultural.' My conception
of it is that it embodies the way of being authentically human particu-
lar-to a given people who share a common history and destiny. The way this
people will welcome Christ will be unique and peculiar to them. Taking
this point into account, this rite will be as flexible as possible in order to
allow for its adaptation in a variety of African cultures. The principal ele-
ments of this rite are as follows.

2.0.1. Family

This rite takes place in the family, properly understood in Africa as the
immediate and extended family, comprising all who share name, home,
occupation, responsibility, and consanguinous and non-consanguinous
affiliation with the family. The reason for situating this rite in the heart of

4 Oroboratar, "The Quest for an African Christ...."93.

the family derives from the centrality of the reality called family in Africa.
While it is true that this latter is presently undergoing intense stress, the
fact still remains -- as it was affirmed in the African Synod -- that, the so-
ziological and anthropological category of the "extended African family is
the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge;"5 "the
original space for the meeting of culture and Gospel."6

2.0.2. Ancestors

In this rite the communion of the living and the dead members of the
family is underscored.7 To reiterate the importance of the notion of an-
estors in Africa is to belabor the obvious. Hence there is included in this
rite an evocation of all the members of the family, precisely the living
dead and the yet unborn. The point here is to encompass the history and
future of the entire family in a rite whose ultimate goal is the proclamation
of Jesus Christ as Lord and King of the deliberation and life of the family
"yesterday, today and for all ages" (Hebrews 13:8).

2.0.3. Centrality of the Word

This rite is essentially a liturgy of the Word. Christ is the Word who
takes flesh and dwells in our midst (John 1:1-18). The point of this rite is
to celebrate the incarnation of this Word-made-flesh and its concrete ac-
ceptance as the Word of alliance of the family of God.

3.0. The Rite

(All members of the family gather in the room or courtyard or any part
of the house where guests are customarily welcomed. An appropriate
song or chant is intoned. The Presider welcomes everyone)

5 Nuntius (Message of the Synod), #27.
6 Hyacinte Cardinal Thiandoum, Relatio Post Disceptationem (of the African Synod)
#120
7 cf. Mpagi, "The Theology of the Departed....", 43, 55; B. Bujo, African Theology in its
the household, that is, the redeemer and the “authenticator of the African way of life.”

As a guest, Christ is sent by his Father and our Father, the Father the Africans worship and revere as the Creator and Originator of all life. It is this same Father who raises Christ to the fullness of life in the Spirit, and constitutes him Lord of the entire universe and, therefore, of each African family which welcomes him. Since a guest is traditionally a source of blessing, Christ-Our-Guest also brings gifts of fullness of life from the Father and invites all believers to share in these gifts in the Spirit, as one family with the Family of God.

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(All members of the family gather in the room or courtyard or any part of the house where guests are customarily welcomed. An appropriate song or chant is intoned. The Presider welcomes everyone)
3.0.1. Introduction and Evocation

**Presider:** Today, we gather as one family to receive Christ-our-Guest. He comes to us, seeking an opportunity to become one among us and to dwell in our lives. In order to welcome him as a community let us acknowledge in our midst the presence of our ancestors; all our parents, relatives and friends who have gone before us, and are with us today to receive Christ-our-Guest. (The Presider evokes the name of each departed member of the family. After each name all respond)

**All:** Present!

**Presider:** Now that we are complete and gathered in communion with our ancestors, let us hear the request of Christ-our-Guest to enter into our family.

3.0.2. Incarnation and Welcome of the Word

(One of those present reads a text from the Bible)

**Reader:** Christ-our-Guest says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and him with me” (Rev. 3:20). 9

**All:** We know God our Creator, the Supreme Being who sends rain to water our land and make fruitful the labor of our hands; we acknowledge our ancestors who protect us, but who are you Jesus Christ for us?

**Presider:** (He tells the story of the birth of Jesus either in his own words or by reading from Matthew 1:1-25 or Luke 2:1-21 and concludes with the words:) This is the story of how God our Creator sent his son Jesus Christ to be born as one of us into our family.

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All: We rejoice and are glad, we welcome him as our guest, to grow as one of us, to learn from us, and to be a source of blessing for our family. (A symbol of welcome is offered) 10

**Presider:** (Taking the symbol of welcome) He who brings kola-nut also brings life. Christ-our-guest, we offer you kola-nut, sign of friendship, fellowship and welcome from our family. Accept it, and dwell in our home and hearts as one of us.

**All:** Accept this kola-nut and dwell in our home and hearts as one of us! (The Presider breaks the kola-nut and shares it out to all present; there follows singing and rejoicing)

3.0.3. Death of the Word

(After the singing...)

**Presider:** Christ-our-Guest, as a member of our family, you share our joys and our sorrows. We now present to you our joys and our sorrows, share with us our life and our destiny. (Some designated members of the family present the joys and sorrows and needs of the family to Christ-our-Guest following this pattern:)

**Member:** Christ-our-Guest, our sons and daughters are fruitful in birth and our family is blessed with strong and beautiful offsprings.

**All:** Christ-our-Guest, rejoice with us!

**Member:** Our land is well-watered and the yield of our harvest is bountiful.

**All:** Christ-our-Guest, rejoice with us!

10 Depending on the place, this symbol of welcome is what is customarily reserved for guests, such as Kola-nut, a bowl of water, chai (tea), etc.
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Christ-our-Guest

Member: Our family is also plagued by sickness, death, unemployment and many forms of injustice.

All: Christ-our-Guest, mourn with us!

Member: Our hopes and aspirations are assailed by many setbacks, tribalism, hatred, violence.

All: Christ-our-Guest, mourn with us. (Then follows a moment of silence...)

Presider: Christ-our-Guest shares in our joys and in our sorrows. He feels our pains, he mourns with us, because a bush fowl develops headache when it sees one of its own being plucked. He is in solidarity with us and he speaks to us in our joys and our sorrows. (An appropriate text of the Scripture is read)

Reader: Christ-our-Guest says to us: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30, alternatively Luke 5:18-19).

All: Christ-our-Guest, we offer you our joys and our sorrows; give rest and peace to our troubled hearts and may harmony reign in our family. Amen!

Presider: Christ-our-Guest takes upon himself our pains, sorrows, disappointments, cares and worries by dying for us, as a member of our family. He is sent to us by God, our Creator and Sustainer, to give us life in abundance. (The Presider recounts the story of the passion and death of Jesus, or reads the first part of the Kenosis text, Phil. 2:5-8; and continues) Christ-our-Guest has died to free us from all evils.

All: We mourn the death of Christ our brother and kin who died to free us from all that oppresses our family. (An appropriate mourning song, dirge or incantation is intoned)

Presider: Jesus Christ our brother and kin, has died to redeem our family, but God, Creator and the Sustainer of the life of our family, has raised him up (He reads the second part of the Kenosis text, Phil. 2:9-11, and ends with the words:) Let us rejoice and be glad.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: God our Father has made him the Lord and head of our family.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: Jesus Christ is the life-giver of our family.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: Jesus Christ is fully one of us, and present in our midst.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: Let us then rejoice and be glad. (There follow songs of joy. After singing and dancing, the Presider brings the rite to a close)

Presider: Jesus Christ has come as our Guest, sent by his Father, our Creator. We have welcomed him as one of our family, he has dwelt among us, he has taken our joys, pains and sorrows upon himself, he has liberated us from all that held us captive and oppressed, we rejoice in his presence and are glad.

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Presider: Jesus Christ our brother has died to redeem our family, but God, Creator and the Sustainer of the life of our family, has raised him up (He reads the second part of the Kenosis text, Phil. 2:9-11, and ends with the words:) Let us rejoice and be glad.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: Jesus Christ our brother is risen from the dead.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: God our Father has made him the Lord and head of our family.

All: We rejoice and are glad!

Presider: Jesus Christ is the life-giver of our family.

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Presider: Jesus Christ is fully one of us, and present in our midst.

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Presider: Jesus Christ has come as our Guest, sent by his Father, our Creator. We have welcomed him as one of our family, he has dwelt among us, he has taken our joys, pains and sorrows upon himself, he has liberated us from all that held us captive and oppressed, we rejoice in his presence and are glad.
Christ-our-Guest

All: We proclaim him as the Lord of our life, the giver of new life to our family and to the whole Family of God.

Presider: May Jesus Christ our Lord dwell always in our hearts and in our family forever and ever.

All: Amen! (All disperse with a song. A simple meal may be shared in common, but this not essential to this particular rite)

4.0. Further Explanatory Remarks

One attempt at solving the faith crisis in Africa has been to construct christological models which are authentically African and are not in contradiction with the Gospel. But these models remain theological affirmations lacking concrete translation into reality. This translation is what I attempt to achieve in the above rite. A few further explanations are necessary.

The language of this rite must be the language spoken in the family. This precludes the need for translator/interpreter and, therefore, the lack of adequate understanding of the rite, which could end up achieving a counter-productive effect and reinforcing the gap between Christ-as-Guest and the African Christians who attempt to welcome him into their families.

The Presider at this rite is the head of the family. Depending on the cultural acceptance of the host-family, this could be the mother, father, senior aunt or uncle. The presence of a priest or catechist is not ruled out. Either of these could be present as a witness/participant, and will lead the rite only in the case where the family is converting to Christianity for the first time, that is, supposing that the head of the family is not yet sufficiently versed in the Scriptures to lead such a rite.

To say that Christ is guest is to allow for the cultural adaptation of this christology. As a christological category, it is empty. Depending on the geo-cultural area where this rite is performed, Christ-our-Guest could be welcomed and proclaimed as Elder Brother, Brother Ancestor, Warrior, etc. This effectively eliminates the problems faced by existing models which are only applicable in restricted areas in Africa. The essential point to be kept in view is that any liturgical model proposed must take into account the mysteries of the Incarnation, Birth, Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. This is what I try to cover in the various parts of this rite.

Another point of this rite is that it responds to a way of evangelizing which does not disrupt unnecessarily the life of the African Christians. It affirms the positive elements of it, such as hospitality, solidarity, communion, etc; and challenges at the same time the narrowness of certain conceptions of the family. Christ the head of the family is also the head of other families where he is welcomed; he therefore invites all into the same communion and solidarity with the entire Family of God who profess their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior of all.

As I mentioned above, this rite is a celebration of the Word. As an anthropological category the Word is not alien to Africans. African cultures are essentially oral. The Word is proclaimed and heard. This rite could be regarded as a celebration of aurality, since a text is provided. And in it Jesus Christ, the redeeming and saving Word, enters into the family, is embraced; he redeems all who belong to the family, hear him, and profess faith in him as Lord and Savior. The texts used in this rite are samples, the ideal is that the family will gather together periodically to read the Scripture “from the African perspective,” and find out more about the message and life of Jesus Christ.

Finally, this rite responds to the call of the African Synod for an inculturated liturgy and the inculturation of the entire Christian life and message. It also responds to the ecclesiology of the African Synod, which understands the Church as the Family of God, “a solid base to live concretely the communion of the Church as the People of God.”

11 Nuntius, #18.
12 Thiandoum, Relatio, #5; Cf. also #5.

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11 Nuntius, #16.
12 Thiandoum, Relatio, #5; Cf. also #5.
Conclusion

This essay is an attempt to develop further the laudable efforts of African christologists to make Jesus Christ "feel at home" in the lives and deliberations of African Christians. I have focused on the model of Christ-as-Guest. A similar approach could be adopted for the other models. This implies that the rite which I propose here lays no claim to be the definitive christological rite. Rather, it constitutes an experiment in the pastoral and liturgical adaptation of christological models. As such, it is subject to evaluation and further refinement. It is my hope that this essay will serve as a basis for further theological exploration, as well as christological debates and exchanges regarding concrete and meaningful liturgical and pastoral ways of presenting Jesus Christ as the authentic Lord and Savior of all Africans.

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Conclusion

This essay is an attempt to develop further the laudable efforts of African christologists to make Jesus Christ “feel at home” in the lives and deliberations of African Christians. I have focused on the model of Christ-as-Guest. A similar approach could be adopted for the other models. This implies that the rite which I propose here lays no claim to be the definitive christological rite. Rather, it constitutes an experiment in the pastoral and liturgical adaptation of christological models. As such, it is subject to evaluation and further refinement. It is my hope that this essay will serve as a basis for further theological exploration, as well as christological debates and exchanges regarding concrete and meaningful liturgical and pastoral ways of presenting Jesus Christ as the authentic Lord and Savior of all Africans.

Bibliography


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