

Dancing in Kinshasa

A special celebration of a Roman Catholic Mass according to *le rite zaïrois*

By Grant LeMarquand

The Islamic invasion of North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries swept away Latinized Christianity west of Egypt. The conquest was successful not because of the sword of the conquerors but because the Christian faith of the people was only marginally contextualized. The Christian Berber population, who tended to be Donatist, eventually converted to Islam, and the Roman Christians migrated to more congenial areas of the Empire. "A faith only lightly rooted in the culture faded into mere memory," writes Mark Shaw (*The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*, Grand Rapids: 1996, 81).

As the Christian churches in Africa have emerged from the missionary movement that began in the nineteenth century, they have been characterized by a desire to be both truly Christian and authentically African. The translation of the scriptures into local languages, the production of African Christian art and music, and the publication of African theology are all signs of a church that has taken seriously the vocation of "inculturation," the task of expressing its life in genuinely African ways. At the forefront of this task has been the struggle to worship God in an African idiom. The multitude of African churches, whether planted by missionaries or founded by indigenous leaders, have experimented with various articulations and experiences of worship, from the boringly staid to the most exuberantly charismatic. One of the boldest experiments by a traditional mission-founded church has been the attempt by the Roman Catholic Church in Zaïre, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to produce a Roman Mass adapted for local expression.

The Zaïrean bishops first expressed dissatisfaction with the received European liturgy in 1961, saying that the liturgy in Africa "is not yet adapted to the proper character of our populations, and therefore has remained foreign to them" (according to Chris Nwaka Egbulem's translation in "An African Interpretation of Liturgical Inculturation: The *Rite Zaïrois*," in Michael Downey and Richard Fragomeni, eds., *A Promise of Presence*, Washington: 1992, 228). In 1963, Vatican II initiated a liturgical revision which produced a new *ordo Missae* in 1969. Even when the new rite appeared, however, Africans continued to feel that their religious and cultural sensibilities were not being met. In December of that year the Zaïrean bishops asked permission to find ways to integrate the new *ordo* into Zaïrean life. Between 1970 and 1985 discussions and proposals raised several significant issues. How should the presider at the Eucharist reflect the role of the village chief in the traditional village assembly? How might the manual acts be indigenized so as to include traditional African modes of worship? And most controversially, should the mass include liturgical prayers invoking African ancestors? Finally, as Egbulem reports (231), "on 30 April 1988, following repeated requests to Pope John Paul II by Zaïrean bishops for the approval of the text, the Congregation for Divine Worship formally approved the Zaïrean rite of the eucharist with the official title: *Missel romain pour les diocèses du Zaïre*." This title made it clear that the rite remained a Roman rite and maintained Roman identity. The revisions made by the Congregation, which were substantial, also made it clear that any inculturation of the liturgy would have to be acceptable to the Roman curia. What remained, however, was a rite which, within the confines of the Roman liturgy, nevertheless reflected substantial African adaptation and expression.

On the evening of September 4, 2005, the parish church of St. Albertus in Kinshasa, Congo, is the setting for a special celebration of the Zaïrean Rite. The occasion is the opening of the Twelfth Congress of the Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes or PACE (in French, *l'Association panafricaine des exégètes catholiques* or *l'APECA*). The first meeting of this scholarly association was held in 1979. The organization usually meets biennially, alternating between francophone and anglophone countries. The 2005 gathering coincides with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination to the episcopate of Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, a founding member of PACE and the Archbishop of Kisangani. The conference proceedings, when they appear, will be dedicated to Monsengwo, who serves as the celebrant at this opening liturgy of the Congress. (Proceedings of earlier conferences still in print may be obtained from Abbé Jean-Bosco Matand Bulembat at apecta_pace@yahoo.com.)

The parish worship space is a building of modest size, accommodating perhaps 400 people. This night it has only three walls, the back wall having been removed. Because a large congregation is expected for this special service, the outside courtyard is filled with several hundred more chairs under the stars.

The liturgy begins, appropriately for an African setting, with greetings. A lay member of the congregation, robed as a server, takes the microphone at the lectern and calls "Alleluia!" in a tone of voice inviting a response. The congregation replies, "Alleluia!" Such a greeting is typical in many Protestant churches, especially those of a more Pentecostal variety; a Reverend Sister sitting next to a visitor confirms that this is a practice which has gained popularity in Roman Catholic circles through the influence of Pentecostalism. The actual Zairean Rite (*Missel Romain pour les Diocèses du Zaïre, Kinshasa: 1989, 83*) at this point says the following:

Quand l'heure de la célébration a sonné, l'annonciateur [l'annonciatrice], en habit expressif de sa fonction, paraît devant l'assemblée des fidèles. Il [elle] agite un instrument qui invite au silence.

Mes frères et soeurs, la paix...

R/ La fraternité

La fraternité

R/ La joie

Ensuite il [elle] annonce que la messe va commencer. Il [elle] présente le célébrant principal et les concélébrants, le diacre et éventuellement les visiteurs de marque venus associer à la prière de la communauté paroissiale. Puis, il [elle] demande aux fidèles de se lever et invite les chantres à entonner le chant qui ouvre la célébration.

And, in fact, after the "Alleluias," this is more or less what *annonciateur* does. He welcomes the congregation of the parish and the visitors, identifies the principal celebrant by name, and introduces some of the more distinguished visitors, including one of the country's four Vice-Presidents (seated in his own seat in front of the first row of pews, flanked by bodyguards with walky-talkies), several cabinet ministers (sitting behind the Vice-President), and a Muslim emir. He adds that members of PACE from all over Africa and beyond are present. Six other bishops, including the papal nuncio, are in attendance and are also introduced by name, but the sixty or so priests and several religious are left unnamed.

Then the music starts: African drums, a small organ in the background, and a fifty-voice choir which needs no amplification. And with the music begins a slow procession – solemn and serious, but danced slowly into the church with careful precision. The thurifer steals the show. Leading the procession, this boy of perhaps ten or eleven could show Michael Jackson a few tricks with his careful footwork and intricate maneuvering of the thurible. The congregation evidently loves it, and his appearance provokes a chorus of ululations from many of the women. The sixty or so priests and seven bishops and archbishops follow the incense and torches, slowly dancing up the aisle.

Included in the opening of the liturgy, immediately prior to the *Gloria*, comes the section of the Rite that provoked the most discussion and controversy as proposals for the Rite were being drafted: "*invocation des saints et des ancêtres au Coeur droit.*" The invocation begins with a set of three versicles and responses addressed to Mary, followed by a set addressed to the Patriarchs and Prophets, a third group addressed to the Apostles and Evangelists, and then one invoking "*tous les saints du ciel.*" None of this, of course, is controversial in a Roman Catholic setting. The final set, however, reads:

Vous, nos ancêtres au Coeur droit,

R/ Soyez avec nous.

Vous qui, aidés par Dieu,

L'avez servi fidèlement,

R/ Soyez avec nous.

Venez, glorifions ensemble le Seigneur

R/ avec tous ceux qui célèbrent la messe à cette heure.

Beneath this liturgical form are several important theological and apologetic issues, none so important for Christian believers of any denomination in an African context than the frequently asked question of the fate of the ancestors, one's blood relatives, who lived and died before the message of the Christian gospel came to their part of Africa. For African Christians this question is not a matter of mere speculation, but a question which goes to the heart of their identity. It is also a profoundly theological issue, for it raises the question of the nature of God's love. Does God's care and mercy extend so far that it will encompass those who were never given the chance to respond to the gospel? And it is not only Roman Catholic liturgy which has sought to express a positive view of the ancestors. The rather low-church evangelical Anglican Church of Kenya includes in the eucharistic preface the phrase, "Therefore with angels, archangels and faithful ancestors in heaven..."

The Liturgy of Word proceeds without surprise until the gospel is to be read. At this point dancing once again becomes an important part of the liturgy as the deacon, the thurifer and the servers dance around the Holy Table several times as the choir and congregation sing.

The sermon is preached by a visiting bishop from Cameroon who is also the President of PACE. Two themes are underlined in the homily. The first is that the Congress which is being opened by this eucharistic service is for the purpose of learning the word of God more deeply so that the laity will be able to read and learn and live the word of God more faithfully.

The preacher (in honour of Archbishop Monsengwo's anniversary) spends some minutes addressing the role of the episcopacy, mentioning that bishops should be faithful interpreters of the scriptures and also faithful defenders of the rights of the people in the face of poverty and injustice. The visitor cannot help but surmise that the Vice-President's presence at the front of the church is one of the reasons that these issues are being emphasized. Interestingly, although politicians are often given a chance to address the congregation in such settings in Africa, on this occasion no such courtesy is extended, although the visitor is given to understand later that it was requested. In fact, although the political visitors are invited to the reception following the Mass, where they will be publicly welcomed and seated at the head table, once again their request to speak will be denied.

There is no doubt that Roman Catholic leaders in Africa see their vocation as including a strong role vis-à-vis the state. In the Congo in particular this is symbolized in the liturgy by the fact that the bishops' mitres are removed for only a few minutes during the celebration – mainly during the prayer of consecration. For most of the rest of the service the mitres stay on, symbolizing the role of the bishop as in some ways fulfilling the role of the village chief whose crown would remain on his head during official community events. If the bishop is something like the chief of a village, this would seem to imply that the modern secular politician must, at best, share power with the religious authorities. In this liturgy, however, it is clear that the bishops themselves are under authority: as a gift to the Archbishop of Kisangani, the choir sings a splendid version of Handel's "Halleluia Chorus," emphasizing that the Lordship of Jesus is over all.

The Rev. Dr. Grant LeMarquand is Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Mission at Trinity. Dr. LeMarquand has written and edited numerous articles and books, including Why Haven't You Left? Letters from the Sudan and A Comparative Study of the Story of the Bleeding Woman in North Atlantic and African Contexts. He is executive editor of Trinity's new theological journal, the Trinity Journal for Theology & Ministry and international editor of Anglican and Episcopal History.