A Case for Christian Communalism: Overcoming Individualism and Racial Segregation in an *Ubuntu*-Infused South African Catholic Parish

Jordan Layton
Brigham Young University
1 December 2009

A Case for Christian Communalism: Overcoming Individualism and Racial Segregation in an *Ubuntu*-Infused South African Catholic Parish

Abstract

In post-apartheid South Africa, politicians have raised concerns about rising individualism and decreasing communal, humanistic *ubuntu* values. People in East London, South Africa, defined *ubuntu* as first, a bringing together of people, and second, a sense of sharing or interaction. *Ubuntu* is linked closely to Christian spirituality, and thus Christianity would be the ideal medium for its reinforcement. However, scholars often characterize Christianity as intense individualism—the theoretical opposite of *ubuntu*. In contrast to arguments of Christian individualism, East London's Immaculate Conception Catholic parish reflects and promotes *ubuntu* through liturgical worship. First, the parish promotes Vatican II-inspired unity of worship--the "bringing-together" of people. Second, the parish promotes sharing and interaction through participation in both the liturgy and non-Mass ministries of the church, such as the choir. The interracial communalism promoted in the Immaculate Conception Mass not only contradicts claims of Christian individualism, but proposes significant racial implications for uniting post-apartheid South Africa.

"That man across the street is the only one I don't care for. He put up those rugby posts--what we call them--and he didn't even ask permission of anyone," a woman I call Auntie vents, pointing to the tall concrete wall and gate over the neighbor's driveway across the street. We sit inside the open sliding-glass doorway, enjoying the comfortable winter temperature and watching neighbors pass by. A neighbor walks across Auntie's dirt yard, taps on the door, and pokes his head in, yelling a conversation to the back kitchen. A neighbor's ability to stop by as this man did is the sense of community being threatened by the other neighbor's "rugby posts;" this was not always an issue. Auntie tells of the apartheid days when common resistance unified her and her peers. As students, they would run and hide to avoid torture whenever they resisted white-policies. "We depended on other students to house us. There were a lot of friendships born out of that. We became like a family."

As I near my host family's neighborhood after leaving Auntie's, the streets feel like constraining tunnels. Lining the curbs are wall after wall of concrete above my head, topped with

razor wires, electric lines, or metal spikes. The only breaks to the walled monotony are tall, jail-like gates. Shutting the automatic gate behind me instills the intentional impression of exclusion from the outside. My hosts admitted that they rarely speak to neighbors beyond an occasional passing greeting. They admitted that their Catholic Church in another neighborhood, Cambridge, acts more as a community than does their actual geographic neighborhood. While after church "people still go back to their own neighborhoods," the Catholic Church promotes bringing people together into interactive sharing in a way that is increasingly threatened in neighborhoods of East London, South Africa. Catholicism promotes a traditional South African concept, *ubuntu,* in opposition to increasing individualism in East London society and arguments that Christianity is inherently individualistic.

Ubuntu's Endangerment

The "rugby posts" across from Auntie's house gives a glimpse of a larger picture in which the privacy and security of walled homes is increasingly sought after, even in townships where resistance to apartheid once forged strong communal unity. In fact, the incident represents a national concern. Anthropologist Adam Ashforth said about the Johannesburg township of Soweto, "In the past, obscuring a house with high walls, even with hedges and trees, would have been considered an antisocial affront to the rest of the community... By the late 1990s, however, high brick walls with heavy steel gates had become commonplace in Soweto,... a matter no longer just of protecting oneself from strangers but also of exclusion of neighbors" (2005:102). Ashforth (among others) voices this decline in sense of community as a decline in the traditional, humanistic, South African concept of *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu entails a sense of community established through compassion, inclusion, solidarity, charity, and other such characteristics and actions. Interdependence and communalism are underlying themes, the antithesis being individualism. Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) sought to examine *ubuntu's* many definitions and to create a common understanding, concluding that

ubuntu emphasizes an individual's worth while recognizing that choosing to act for the good of others is in the individual's best interest. Individualism, including competitiveness and seeking one's own interests, is damaging to others. People in East London summarized *ubuntu* in two ways. First, it means "bringing people together," such as when non-whites like Auntie felt physically and spiritually united against the white oppression. Second, it means "sharing," implying a level of interaction. For example, "if you have an apple, sharing is [in] force under *ubuntu* because you do not eat an apple alone when there are people surrounding you not eating." Also, school children might learn each other's languages and games.

Ubuntu is a spiritual matter, and as South Africa is considered a "Christian country" (as stated in one church), Christianity should logically reflect and transmit such values. Ellison and Levin (1998), for example, argue that the "close-knit ties that flourish in religious settings tend to bolster the physical and mental health of those who attend church, temple, or synagogue on a regular basis" (cited by Krause 2002:126). Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) summarize that "although there is no single definition of *ubuntu*, all the definitions cited imply that *ubuntu* is more than just a manifestation of individual acts. Rather, it is a spiritual foundation, an inner state, an orientation, and a good disposition that motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel, and act in a humane way towards others" (218). They use religious-oriented examples from Steve Biko, L. Pato, and L.J. Sebidi. That Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu believes *ubuntu* to be tied to Christianity is evident in Michael Battle's *Reconciliation* (1997) and in Tutu's own prominence in the Anglican Church.

Unfortunately, since apartheid ended, Western influence (possibly in the form of market capitalism) seems to have precipitated a decline in the prevalence of this value system. Correspondingly, one sees an increase in concern for its re-promotion as a characteristic of all South Africans (see Mlambo-Ncguka 2006). Then-deputy president Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

said in her keynote address at the 2006 National Imbizo on Ubuntu and Nation-building in South Africa:

> How do we describe the wave of individualism and obsession with material wealth above all else and abdication from social responsibility by even those who have means to help? Where is an African family as we used to know? Can we still talk of a community and what has happened to the spirit of human solidarity and respect for elders? The whole notion of *umuntu wumuntu ngabantu* (*ubuntu*) seems to have been obliterated by modern developments and Western influence. Have we really become an uncaring and unforgiving society? Is that the dominant feature that defines who we are today? (21)

Individualism and Christianity

Critics might find in Phumzile's address a significant contradiction with my proposition of Catholic-promoted *ubuntu*. If Western influence has resulted in the increase in individualism, and Christianity is in general a western institutions, how could Christianity then promote communal *ubuntu* values? Would Christianity not, on the contrary, be individualistic as well? After all, individualism is an antithesis of *ubuntu*. The erroneous foundation of such confusion, however, lies in the common claim that Christianity is wholly individualistic. On the other hand, literature arguing the communal, non-individualistic nature of Christianity is sparse, and tends to take either a historical approach (see Mayes 2004) or one of explaining Church policy (see Scirghi 2007). Furthermore, there has been no consideration of the communal nature of Christianity considering the highly spiritual, yet highly communal, concept of *ubuntu*. So I will first introduce the argument of Christian individualism, and then show that the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church effectively promotes *ubuntu*, contrary to theories of Christian individualism.

Many argue that Christianity increases individualism (see Buss 2000; Bellah et al. 1985). For example, Joseph Murray (1995) criticizes Christianity as being “self-serving redemptionism.” Also, Masayuki Ito (1998) argues that the dominating Buddhist, Shinto, and Confucian religions in Japan stand behind Japan's “failed” adoption of individualism, because such religions focus on complete negation of self. But Christianity, he says, has historically been

individualistic; for example, the relationship between Jesus and his disciples was not kinship but symbolic of individual responsibility before a monotheistic God which in itself reflects a focus on individuals (623). Ito's argument, however, reflects a complete generalization of Christianity despite context or denomination, for the doctrines on deity and discipleship are subject to wide interpretation within Christianity itself. Ito goes as far as to suggest that all Christian fellowship is individualistic, which would probably come as a surprise to followers of a Jesus who denied his self out of love for mankind. One interpretation cannot be assumed to represent all Christian denominations. Consider comments by Wendy Cadge about the individualistic nature occasionally present even in American Buddhism, including a focus on solitary activities like meditation (2007). This suggests that it is not the religion itself , but its overall cultural context that entails individualism--great hope for an *ubuntu*-seeking Christian South Africa. After all, individualism from modern division of labor coupled with that erroneously assigned to Christianity would leave little hope for promoting communal values in any Western context!

More properly, Christianity is capable of promoting communalism *differently* than Buddhism, not as opposed to it As each denomination varies in focus on individual versus group, each lies somewhere along a spectrum. Despite critiques of Christian individuality, Immaculate Conception unifies communities through its emphasis on communal worship. And this occurs despite *individual* variations in musical preference, language, geography, or economic situation. proving the potential of Catholicism to promote communal *ubuntu* values.

Immaculate Conception Background

My hosts, Cornelius and Kathy Thomas, wrote the history of East London's "North End," the neighborhood of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church (see Thomas 2008). In the early-1900s, German immigrants settled the area, along with Afrikaaners from a nearby Boer War camp. Then came coloureds (a long-established mixed race), British whites, and immigrants from India. From about 1960 to 1973, North End enjoyed a "golden age" of interracial

community. "'North End was one big, happy family," (Thomas 2008:34), "children were everyone's children" (32), and Christian and Hindu holidays were shared publicly (44). In the mid-1970s, however, apartheid's Group Areas Act forced geographic segregation. First, coloureds in outlying suburbs were forced to move *into* North End. Many whites moved out to take the abandoned houses, creating "white" suburbs that remain to this day predominantly white (and wealthy). The coloureds were relocated out of North End and into an undeveloped piece of land now called Buffalo Flats, where Auntie lives. The Indian population was moved to the suburb of Braelyn, abandoning their Hindu temple to be bulldozed. Blacks settled Duncan Village or were forced over fifteen kilometers outside of town to Mdantsane township. North End's houses were bulldozed, but not Immaculate Conception, and commercial enterprises and media towers rose around it. Now, the Church is mostly surrounded by stores, factories, funeral homes, and other churches, with only some above-store apartments scattered throughout. Yet people come from neighborhoods and townships all over East London to worship at Immaculate Conception. As a book distributed by the diocese states, it "has come to represent a cross-section of South Africa's cultural diversity. The parish register reflects approximately 650 families, with 900 people attending Mass over a weekend." In other words, the parish unites people in common worship no matter what geographic, racial, or linguistic background they come from as individuals.

***Ubuntu* Characteristic #1: Bringing People Together**

Catholic Controlism

The interests of the Immaculate Conception parish are far from what John Watt outlined as characteristics of "individualism from a 20th century standpoint" (1989:1). The following are three examples of Watt's characteristics: "the appeal to universal natural individual rights as the basis for moral and social views, rather than to rights and responsibilities attached to group memberships and occupation of particular roles;" "the drive to limit the scope of collective

control in a variety of areas in order to enlarge the area for individual autonomy;" and "the conviction that individual uniqueness, initiative and autonomy are more important that group identity, conformity and solidarity" (1-2). The opposite is the case at Immaculate Conception. While facing social diversity and individualistic interests, the parish has reemphasized a Vatican-inspired decree that worship be kept within the bounds of Church structure, in unity and sameness wherever possible.

The Vatican II council convened in the sixties in order to rethink the way the Catholic Church runs things, from monasteries to liturgy ("public worship") (Abbott 1966:134). While "the age and condition of their people, their way of life, and degree of religious culture should be taken into account," the council made clear that any such variations should be kept within bounds (145). Some societies, for example, have musical traditions that are very important to their social life. So, "other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations, *so long as* they accord with the spirit of the liturgical action" (172-173, italics added). It is also important that people understand texts and rites in the church; however, "notable differences between the rites in adjacent regions are to be carefully avoided" (147). Again, "popular devotions... are warmly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the church... These devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them" (143, also see 151). This means that although the music can vary if needed, "the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument" (173). And, even if local languages are used, "steps should be taken so that the faithful may also be able to say or to sing together in Latin" (156), for Latin "may frequently be of great advantage to the people" (150).

Consider the unifying, controlled nature of those statements. Do they represent Watt's emphases on individual rights over group membership, individual autonomy over collective

control, or individual uniqueness over group conformity? No. There is a clearly-voiced limit to the amount of individual variation possible. One Catholic parishioner said, "The church embraces diversity and is open to allow space and a bit of freedom for cultural differences and different expressions; but by and large I think that almost everything is controlled; everything is structured and guided to a certain point, guided to the Eucharist." Choir director Vernon says that a church can adapt interpretation of symbols to their culture but that the culture should not change the liturgy to fit their culture.

Vernon introduced me to the book on the Vatican II documents quoted above, so that I could learn upon what basis he was running the choir. His desire to follow the Vatican's council includes increasing the use of Latin for singing. I proposed to him that because most people understand at least some English, singing in English allows for the greatest unity, but he corrected me, saying, "Latin does." He continued, "I'm already trying to bring back in the Latin, teaching it to the choir; and before Mass we teach it to the congregation. Latin is the Church's official language. English isn't everyone's language; so, Latin doesn't exclude anyone." Thus, as members of the congregation come from Afrikaans, Xhosa, English, and other language-speaking homes, Latin places all on equal grounds by being a second language for everyone. I asked a choir member what he thought about this use of Latin. He responded, “The thing with Latin is it’s really a common language, but I think the people are also a bit more hyped up when we sing Latin. I don’t know if you’d seen at this practice when we did that Latin two verses, that I just got this feeling that people just sort of learned quicker and maybe the language *pulls the people together* quickly.”

It is, in fact, a dominant goal of the Vatican II council that this unity of worship creates communal unity in the Catholic Churches:

> It is the goal of this most sacred Council to intensify the daily growth of Catholic in Christian living; to make more responsive to the requirements of our times those Church observances which are open to adaptation; to nurture whatever can contribute to the unity

> of all who believe in Christ; and to strengthen those aspects of the Church which can help summon all of mankind into her embrace. (137)

It is through the liturgy that people are to be inspired to "become of one heart in love" (142). If people are to have this true Christian spirit, it is necessary that there is "full and active participation by all" (144), in singing, actions, and even silences (148). "Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the 'sacrament of unity,' namely, a holy people united and organized" (147). Communal worship is always preferred to individual worship (147-148). People should not be there "as strangers or silent spectators," but "through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever closer union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all" (154).

In fact, the Mass itself should establish a communal sense of *ubuntu*: "Efforts also must be made to encourage a sense of community within the parish, above all in the common celebration of the Sunday Mass" (153). One of the main functions of holy music in the Mass is to promote solidarity (171). Even a reformation scholar commenting on the Vatican II plan admitted that "if the constitution can be translated into action creatively and imaginatively... it will indeed, as the Council Fathers hope, 'contribute to the unity of all who believe in Christ'." (182). This goal of unity, solidarity, participative interaction, and community is just what concerned advocates of *ubuntu* in South Africa are asking for.

"You Cannot Break a Collection of Wood"

Speech within Immaculate Conception reflects these Vatican II ideals, being centered consistently on unity, love, community, and “being one.” “We are working hard to make this a hospitable church for all people, where people can come in and be at home in our community," the priest says. Each Mass, in fact, is dedicated to someone in need or to be remembered. For three weeks in a row, special meetings were held during the week to promote the "unity and solidarity in the parish." All were asked to bring their friends and their families to take part. At

the first meeting, the priest's extensive sermon was explicitly dedicated to this topic. "You cannot break a collection of wood," he says, "It is only when you begin to take one stick of wood... that [you are] able to break each stick... With a theme that we have this evening—a people of unity, something that is very difficult to live up to but very easy to speak about—we speak about unity of Christians, we speak about unity of families; but perhaps today we have a day or a moment of reflecting together about this unity." From the Catechism of the Catholic Church, he cites article 161: "The Church is one because she has as her source an exemplar: the unity of the Trinity of persons in one God." It is through this symbolism that he explains the "bringing together" of people the parish desires. "First of all, in the Trinity, they are equal. In other words, they are of the same status. And so in the parish we, too—all of us—we are equal." The second and third points of his Trinity sermon will be relevant later; but first, the bringing of people together into joint prayers, recitations, and music reflects this God-like equality and unity.

Harmony Through Liturgy

Prayers and recitations in the Church reflect a sameness of worship into which people of different backgrounds come together. One parishioner says, "Certainly it's very, you could almost say controlled, this communal worship, this sameness of belief. It's required of all of us. And in that sense maybe it's less individualistic than in the evangelical and certain Protestant churches." It is in the very nature of coming together to worship, as opposed to worshiping at home, that the "public worship" definition of liturgy can be seen. Vernon, the choir director, says, "Prayer in the church is supposed to be one praying for the rest, not everyone praying for themselves at the same time. If you want to pray for you, go home to your closet, but not at the church. That is for people *coming together*."

The communal nature of the liturgy became further clear in a conversation with a Catholic couple. The husband said, "Look, in the Catholic Church, they do believe that the church is one, they do believe in the communion of Saints, they do believe in common prayer,

they do believe that all of us must profess the same creed of faith, and in that sense it's really communal. But," he considers, "I don't know if that negates individuality or individualism in the Catholic Church." His ending caution refers to the fact that individuals are distinct and unique; however, the rest of the conversation reveals that the individual is insufficient without the parish context. Soon after, the wife says, "I would never read without going, because that's important to me that I am in *communion*, like this faith that we profess, that we are one." The husband then adds, as if in revelation, "That community thing, that communal thing, it's very important. It comes out here. You know, we pray together. We believe that it's better to worship together than to worship in private." The wife says, "If you chose to be a Catholic, then...," and her husband finishes, "…then you must be part of the community, and the community of worship, and the communalism of the church. The Catholic Church doesn't allow for a lot of individualism. You can't be a Catholic and not go to church. Yeah, well, I pray at home, I worship at home—it's not going to be acceptable. The Catholic Church does not allow for that kind of individualism." Contrary to Christian individualism arguments, these Catholics, at least, see church not as an individual matter, but a communal one.

The fixed liturgical structure of frequent hymn singing also reflects "bringing people together" into a controlled "sameness" of worship. Consider the previously discussed Vatican II regulations on the use of vernacular or cultural variations in music being acceptable only when "they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them" (143). The leader of Immaculate Conception's rock band, which performs in the organ's place every other Sunday, said, "[We] find out on Wednesday what we're going to be playing but it also depends on the time of the year, it depends on the liturgy." Noticing that the musical selection differed between Saturday and Sunday Masses, I also asked Rodney, the organist for Sunday and weekday Masses, how he chose the hymns to be sung. "[For the weekend] you have

a theme," he says, "There's a theme for each week and you do your best to follow the theme and to select hymns accordingly." For weekday Masses, "we stick to pretty general hymns," which most people know and can participate in. Vernon chooses songs for Saturday Masses, but they must also fit within the same theme as outlined by the worldwide Church liturgy. Thus, across Immaculate Conception Masses, even though instrumentation and singing style may vary, the theme remains constant and unified. Individual hymn choice is constrained by the institution. Another member says, "When it comes to certain religious feasts you must sing certain hymns. It's almost *predecided*."

Within the music there is also a unity of action in standing and sitting together. When I ask Rodney why specific moments in Mass include specific positions, he says, "I don't know if I can really answer that, because this is how it's done in the Catholic church; there are parts of the Eucharist where you kneel. This is our teaching, and this is how we've been taught—that you kneel when you're supposed to kneel... It is a tradition."

Vernon believes that there should be even more structure to the musical liturgy than Rodney follows. He says, "People enjoy what makes sense to them, and it makes sense that certain times you should sing and certain times you shouldn't... You'll find people in Immaculate Conception from all over... People will come from their churches in the townships because they want to have the right way of doing things." Thus, he believes that it is because the Church's liturgical regulations are being followed that people come together from all over East London to worship in Immaculate Conception. When I suggested to a parishioner that the Duncan Village congregation seems to adhere less to liturgical structure as they sing so much more often, he denied it, saying, "[It is] within the structure of the sermon... Between a specific structured event and the next event in that structure, they might have three songs or three hymns whereas we would have a short three minute one."

Clearly, the Immaculate Conception parish places a heavy emphasis on promoting the "bringing together" aspect of *ubuntu* within not only their verbal teachings, but also the structured liturgy. The sermons and prayers heavily reflect this priority. The music then reflects a doing-together activity characterized by sameness, outlined by the Church in general to be consistent and unifying across both Mass and parish lines. And it is the Catholic need for "public worship" that negates individualism and promotes the need for others.

To conclude this section, I return to the special sermon on unity and solidarity, as the priest gives the second reason why the Trinity reflects the communal ideals of the parish. "Secondly," he says, "the Trinity is made up of distinct persons.... You are all unique, you are all distinct, you all have something to contribute to the unity and the welfare of this parish." He recognizes that the individual exists, but that his best interest is in contributing his part to the group. This is consistent with Desmond Tutu's concept of *ubuntu.* According to Battle (1997), whose book Tutu endorsed, Tutu saw that "behind [apartheid] stood the clashing cultures of the Western and African worlds. Because of this impasse, Tutu sought to examine the bankrupt [individualistic] elements of Western culture and the overly collectivistic elements of African culture in order to fashion an *ubuntu* theology" (36,39). *Ubuntu* does not require a group of Siamese twins acting in robotic monotone, but instead implies a group of people united by unanimous contribution and a common interest which takes precedence over individual desires. In other words, common worship is the unifying goal of the Immaculate Conception parish, without attempting to remove all variations in skin-tone, personality, or ethnic culture; and this is consistent with *ubuntu*. In fact, that "all have something to contribute" leads to the sharing and interaction of parishioners and the fulfillment of the second characteristic of *ubuntu*.

Ubuntu #2 Sharing, Interaction, and Getting to Know Each Other

"A Theme of Complimenting Each Other"

"Thirdly," the priest teaches, "one of the chief features of the Trinity is service... Today as a community we have chosen a great theme, a theme of unity, a theme of uniting people, a theme of knowing each other, acknowledging each other, caring for each other, and complimenting each other." In what stronger words could the parish verbally promote sharing and interaction between its people? In Mass, attendants are commonly reminded of their opportunities to contribute to the charitable branches of the parish, the Catholic Woman's League and St. Vincent de Paul organizations. "Support the SVP, support the CWL, not only just for the gifts that we can give, but also to give of our sacrifice, to give of our time; and that may just be what is needed. When we are unable to multiply the food, give what we can give, and let God multiply that food in the stomachs of those that we have given." Clearly the parish promotes sharing, contributing, and interaction aspects of *ubuntu.* And this, too, can be seen beyond the pulpit.

Sharing and Interaction in the Liturgy

Catholic prayers and recitations are interactive in their call and response nature. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) writes about Black churches in America, showing that the call and response nature of both words and music promotes solidarity. He says, "tools--primarily prayer, call-and-response interaction, and Christian imagery--invoke the collective orientation of Black Christianity" (768). Furthermore, "using call-and-response style, the preacher and the congregation, in musical and verbal cooperation, make the journey toward freedom as one body" (770). Consider, for example, the Prayers of the Faithful section of the Mass. After each line of prayer, the congregation responds together with "Lord, graciously hear us." This prayer with “response” is not highly distinct from call-and-response structures inherent in traditional African music styles, in which one man or woman sings a lead part while the rest respond in unified chorus; this I witnessed many times while in East London, from daycare parties to funerals.

Call-and-response structure is, in fact, one of the major interactive features of the music liturgy at Immaculate Conception. This is especially evident in three of the four musical styles

used in their various Masses. First, in the Saturday evening Masses, Vernon has brought back into the liturgy the use of the cantor, a man or woman who sings solo verses in sections of the Mass such as the "responsorial psalm." The cantor creates a call-and-response interaction similar to the Prayers of the Faithful reader. When a cantor is used, he or she first sings the "response" to the congregation so as to demonstrate; then, he or she sings the lines of the first verse, following which the whole congregation responds with the given response. This is repeated for each verse. Sometimes, such as in "Coventry Gloria," the cantor and the congregation trade off almost every single line. In other Masses, this responsorial psalm is sung by all. Every few weeks, the singing is in Xhosa, and a call-and-response structure is characteristic of every song. In that case, two or three women at the front of the choir balcony begin a song by singing the first line, following which everyone else stands and joins in. Throughout the Xhosa hymns, call-and-response sections recur often and sometimes last for several minutes, such as alternating repeatedly on only the word "Alleluia." Even where singing is in Xhosa, African choir members reassured me that the words were identical to the English versions. Finally, when the band plays, they use call-and-response arrangements of their own. One common example (in 4/4 time) consists of three quarter note pickups to a downbeat, followed by an identical echo over the next three notes and downbeat. In this case, the choir and congregation divide themselves up arbitrarily each time and sing in call-and-response with one another; the priest prefers the "echo."

The most interactive moment in the Mass seems to be the "Our Father" singing and the "Peace" handshake. It is in the sung prayer of "Our Father"—in which the entire congregation holds hands, sways sometimes, and often harmonizes musically with each other—that people first physically interact with one another in the Mass. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) states, "practices such as holding hands during prayer, participating through antiphonal calls of agreement or dissent, and singing, clapping, and swaying to music all enact the collective goals expressed in the content of social action" (770). However, during "Our Father" people are not looking at one

another, so what of face-to-face interaction? Just after the prayer is sung, hands are dropped and people turn to one another, shake their hand, usually look into their eyes, and say, "Peace be with you." For a minute or two, people leave their fixed seat-space, move down the bench, across the aisle, or around the balcony, and shake not only the hands of the people immediately around them but the hands of people three or four seats away. Whatever racial, age, economic, or personality differences people arrived with, they are lost at this moment in a collective of mutual acknowledgement and and well-wishes. As Rashakrishnan (2003) finally found in her attempt to see unity in a South African multi-racial dance troupe, there came upon one performance "a rare euphoric moment of unity. For that stretch of time, the boundaries between [them] seemed to blur a little" (537).

A Sense for Community

Manuel Barrera (1986) suggested three characteristics a review of social support measures should consider: first, "*tangible*...help that is actually provided by social network members;" second, "*subjective* evaluations of supportive exchanges such as satisfaction with support;" and third, "*frequency* of contact with others" (as summarized in Krause 2002:128-129, italics added). The Vatican II and Immaculate Conception promotion of communal values as discussed to this point reflect the "tangible" efforts provided. While these aspects of Mass suggest actual, visible manifestations of the promotion of *ubuntu*, the study would here be incomplete without considering to what extent people *percieve* these intentions to actually create such feelings. After all, the Vatican II council suggests that leaders promote participation of all people in order to create not only unity but also a *"sense"* of community.

To some, coming to church and participating with others in the liturgy is enough for them to feel a sense of community; however, the feeling often depends on the level of communal participation. When I asked one choir member if he felt the church promoted a sense of community or togetherness, he responded, "In some of the churches that I've been to, yes,

definitely. But in some churches if the community doesn't want to take part in the singing actively then you don't get that bringing together of the community really." Dje-Dje, who studied Black American Gospel music, similarly found that "when everyone fully responds and participates in the service, it is regarded as a meaningful experience to all, and a sense of community is felt" (232).

In most cases, people definitely feel that they are a part of the church community; however, almost all attribute that sense of community to additional participation in non-Mass activities, and not to Mass alone. Welch and Leege (1988) "concluded that simple contact with the Catholic subculture (as measured by Mass attendance) does not necessarily guarantee that Catholics will internalize the teachings and value orientations it transmits. Thus, attendance may not be an especially potent predictor of Catholics' sociopolitical attitudes" (537). One woman, for example, found that in only attending Mass she did not get to know others enough. She said, "I used to go to Mass, sit there, and leave without even noticing the person next to me." Thus, while Immaculate Conception visibly promotes solidarity (Barrera's first criteria), the actual *perception* of solidarity (Barrera's second criteria) hinges directly on *frequency* of attendance (Barrera's third criteria). In other words, the Mass liturgy promotes *ubuntu*, but there needs to be more frequent interactive contact for efforts to really translate into a communal reality. If not, people "go back to their own neighborhoods" and spend more time where racial and "rugby post" house divisions pervade.

For example, I asked one choir member if he thought church music contributed to *ubuntu* and the sense of community in the church. He replied, “Yes, I think so, especially as people do things during the week, not just come to Mass. Because people come here and leave and they don’t know anyone. But there used to be small groups that would go to people’s houses during the week and pray for that family." Immaculate Conception began to re-promote these Small

Christian Communities in the final weeks of my research, holding special weeknight meetings dedicated to the idea.

The idea of meeting more frequently through small groups of believers is not unique to Catholicism. An evangelical woman told me, “A minister who was at my brother’s birthday party yesterday always says that people get lost in a large crowd. I think it’s in the cell groups (the equivalent of Small Christian Communities) that that essential 'getting to know each other' and 'building a community' happens.”

Besides Small Christian Communities, participating in one or multiple "ministries" of the church promotes solidarity. Rodney, the organist, says, “A ministry would be an organist, a communion giver, an usher in the church—they’re all ministries.” I asked him, “Do you feel like in the Mass itself you get to interact with people, or does interaction and getting to know people happen more outside of Mass?” He responded, “I would say it’s more outside, yes, not during Mass.” I asked him, then, when he has gotten to know people, since he admitted he *does* feel like he is part of the community at Immaculate Conception. He responded, simply, "Before and after."

That even an organist such as Rodney can feel part of the community is highly revealing. During several choir practices in which I participated, I was called upon to assist in playing the organ. Sitting at the 105 year-old pipe organ is like sitting in a cubicle. All periphery vision of other human beings is eliminated, and the organist sits in the balcony at the back of the chapel, facing south while everyone else faces north. The only other individual facing south is the priest, whose position in the front "sanctuary" at least faces the congregation. So, an organist must rely on the small mirror above his or her head to see either a distant priest or the scalps of a standing choir. But Rodney, as he suggested, can be seen mingling with other parishioners before and after Mass, as well as during the "Peace" handshake. Indeed, many gather into small groups before and after Mass, chatting with one another in the pews or outside of the building.

Participation in choir practice is one of the most community-building ministries. I asked one choir member, “In what circumstances with the church do you feel like you meet people and get to know them?” He said, "Because I take part in a few ministries in the church, you really get to know people. If you don’t take part in ministries, like choir, reading, and the liturgy committee then you don’t really get close to the people." Although one can meet people at Mass, he says "it’s with the other ministries that you really start getting connected to people.” In his case, choir is especially applicable: “We are closer together and we attend practices more regularly and all these things... The other choir members that attend the other Masses, they know one another but I think we are little bit more closer linked at the [Saturday] Mass because our members come to practice more regularly, and I think that also we don’t want to disappoint one another by not attending." The closest associations, the most enjoyable birthday celebrations, and the greatest laughs I experienced during my weekly participation in Immaculate Conception choir practice. While non-choir parishioners offered me rides or introduced themselves, it was in the choir that I received hugs from people I had never yet met. They are the names I remember and the faces who showed sorrow at my departure. Thus, while there is a "coming together" integration at the parish, the interaction and sharing side of *ubuntu* occurs in not only call-and-response practices or holding hands during Mass singing, but in more frequent participation in the form of Small Christian Communities or ministries such as the choir.

Post-Apartheid Implications In Conclusion

As races remain notoriously divided in post-apartheid South Africa, the potential for Christianity to promote *ubuntu* is significant especially in terms of unified interracial communities. Possibly because of its success in promoting *ubuntu*, the Immaculate Conception parish seems to have a unique headstart. Compared to racially homogenous parishes in other areas, "Immaculate Conception parish is an anthropological phenomenon," as one member says. Where races remain heavily divided geographically, economically, and linguistically, the

Immaculate Conception parish brings races together and promotes sharing between them. Perhaps it is similar to America's Immaculate Conception National Shrine, designed to be a "perpetual chorus of peoples... where all the nationalities that made up the great melting pot would be represented" (Tweed 2000:6).

Most people consider South Africa's Catholic Church to have been immune from racial division even during apartheid. One woman said:

> "The Catholic Church has always embraced all races. We never had divisions. Other churches, like the Dutch Reformed Church, used to have particular churches for white people, black people, coloured people, where[as in] the Catholic Church we could always go to any church. It's always encouraged that. I think it's always tried very hard in doing that. And the influence of the nuns there has been very important because there--whatever ministries they have--they include all people, all colors, and they reach out to all kinds of people."

Interracial interaction, she says, was always present "on the church level." Another man said, "This could be a daring statement or a bold statement, but I think Catholic people are probably, possibly less racist than other people in South Africa." Asking him why, he said, "We've been taught tolerance. The Church is universal. That's what Catholic means. We have to embrace everyone. We are taught that from little." Another man said simply, "I think the Catholic Church has never *seen* race. It's *people*, worship as *people*."

I noticed my first Sunday at Immaculate Conception that its integration level was unique, significant in that the *coming together* of races was accompanied by an *interaction and sharing* not found in most facets of society. After all, races come together in the street but one could hardly call that communal. The benches, on the other hand, were speckled with a mixture of ethnicities--blacks, coloureds, whites, and Indians, seated intermixed and with no visible physical divisions. I stood in the back with dozens of other over-flow individuals and families. As a band played above me in the balcony, the time came to sing "Our Father". With the coloured priest, Father Peter, leading the way, the congregation of mixed skin-tones stood and took each other's hands, stepping into the middle aisle to bridge one of the only physical divides

the architecture created. My hand was taken by a middle-aged black man to my left. Just in front of me was a perfect interracial hand-holding chain: black man--Indian man--white man--coloured woman. Immediately after the singing, we offered to each other the "Sign of Peace" handshake and all bustled about to shake any hands around them. That day, I shook hands with, received smiles from, and looked into the eyes of blacks, Indians, coloureds, and whites. It truly is a “phenomenon.”

So, we have considered the effectiveness of the Immaculate Conception parish in East London, South Africa, in creating a sense of *ubuntu*—communities characterized by a "coming together" and an interactive "sharing." The consideration is one of practical importance as communal values of *ubuntu* are feared to be declining, and while divisions not only between racial groups but between individual neighbors are rising. The Immaculate Conception parish has been successful in promoting communal *ubuntu* values, despite arguments that Christianity is inherently individualistic. In its Mass--including sermons, prayers, recitations, and hymns--the parish brings people together and in many ways causes interaction. Then, through the additional "bringing together" and interaction of extra-Mass participation, in “ministries” such as the choir, a sense of community is really solidified.

North End was once known for interracial cooperation and sharing; and it now is once again. It is as Cornelius and Kathy Thomas, the historians of the area, write: "In the early-21st century,... the former Indian, Coloured, white, Chinese, and African residents of North End and a host of new African and Asian immigrants were cemented into a rainbow of prayerful people. The [Immaculate Conception] church and its congregation is today truly a living monument of days gone by" (Thomas 2008:46). Perhaps this is true of other Catholic parishes, other Christian denominations, and if so with large implications. South Africa, clearly continuing the struggle to recuperate from apartheid, surely holds many hidden gems of cooperation and unity, of *ubuntu*, both within the Christian context and without. These should be discovered, studied, and made

known, to give hope that Christian communities can supersede rising neighborhood walls. Then the Rainbow Nation may truly return to its tradition of *ubuntu*.

References

Abbott, Walter M., ed.

1966 The Documents of Vatican II: With Notes and Commentary by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Authorities. London: The America Press.

Ashforth, Adam

2005 Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.

Battle, Michael

1997 Reconciliation: The Ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press.

Bellah, R.N., et al.

1985 Habits of the Heart. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barrera, Manuel

1986 Distinctions Between Social Support Concepts, Measures, and Models. American Journal of Community Psychology 14: 413-445.

Buss, Andreas

2000 The Evolution of Western Individualism. Religion 31: 1-25.

Cadge, Wendy

2007 Reflection on Habits, Buddhism in America, and Religious Individualism. Sociology of Religion 68(2): 201-205

DjeDje, Jacqueline

1986 Change and Differentiation: The Adoption of Black American Gospel Music in the Catholic Church. Ethnomusicology 30(2): 223-252.

Ellison, Christopher G. and Jeffrey S. Levin.

1998 The Religion-Health Connection: Evidence, Theory, and Future Directions. Health Education & Behavior 25: 700-720.

Ito, Masayuki

1998 The Status of the Individual in Japanese Religions: Implications for Japan's Collectivistic Social Values. Social Compass 45(4): 619-633.

Krause, Neal

2002 Exploring Race Differences in a Comprehensive Battery of Church-Based Social Support Measures. Review of Religious Research 44(2): 126-149.

Mlambo-Ngcuka, Phumzile

2006 Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo Ncguka's address at the National Imbizo on Ubuntu and Nation-building in South Africa, Botshabelo-Steve Tshwete Municipality, Mpumalanga. <http://www.nhc.org.za/?linkID=49&cid=29> (6 Feb 2009).

Mnyaka, Mluleki and Mokgeth Motlhabi

2005 The African concept of ubuntu/botho and its social-moral significance. Black Theology: An International Journal 3(2):215-237.

Moyes, David

2004 Communal Christianity: The Life of a Peasant Vision in Early Modern Germany. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.

Murray, Joseph H.

1995 Self-serving redemptionism: A Jewish-Christian lament. Theology Today 52(1): 108.

Pattillo-McCoy, Mary

1998 Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community. American Sociological Review 63(6): 767-784.

Rashakrishnan, Smitha

2003 “African Dream”: The Imaginary of Nation, Race, and Gender in South African Intercultural Dance. Feminist Studies 29(3): 529-537.

Scirghi, Thomas J

2007 An Iconic View of Communal Worship. Liturgy 22(2): 9-16.

Thomas, Cornelius, and Kathy Thomas

2008 Dust in My Coffee. East London, South Africa: Iqula Publishing.

Tweed, Thomas A.

2000 Proclaiming Catholic Inclusiveness: Ethnic Diversity and Ecclesiastical Unity at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. U.S. Catholic Historian 18(1):1-18.

Watt, John

1989 Individualism and Educational Theory. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Welch, Michael R, and David C. Leege

1988 Religious Predictors of Catholic Parishioners' Sociopolitical Attitudes: Devotional Style, Closeness to God, Imagery, and Agentic/Communal Religious Identity. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 27(4): 536-552.