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Welcome: Notes on The Church as a Community of Reception

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Abstract: The Second Vatican Council affirmed the retrieval of communion ecclesiology and the significance of the local church. Correlating with its communion ecclesiology, questions arose concerning the reception of conciliar teaching. According to Yves Congar, in accordance with the essential conciliarity of the church, reception is a creative process of discernment and assimilation. Black Catholics following the council similarly developed a theology of the local church and a theology of reception. I argue that US Black Catholic theologians and pastors described reception as *welcome* of the Word of God and hospitality toward those who bear the Word.

Keywords:

Black, Catholic, Vatican II, church, reception, synodality

In 1971 six priests, women and men religious, and lay representatives of the National Office for Black Catholics travelled to Rome to seek a meeting with Pope Paul VI during the Second Ordinary General Assembly on the Priesthood and Justice in the World.¹ Concerned about the pastoral situation of Black Catholic communities, they were chosen "to take the Black Catholic case directly to Rome."² Although unsuccessful at gaining an audience with the pope, they secured meetings with John Cardinal Wright, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, Carlo Cardinal Confalonieri, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, Archbishop Duraisamy Simon Lourdisamy of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and Undersecretary of State Archbishop Giovanni Benelli. *Jet* magazine reported the delegation stated that the American bishops "'have been lying to the Vatican' about Blacks in the American church."³ The fiery assertion reflected frustration with the marginalization of Black Catholic leadership. Br. Joseph Davis

¹ The delegation was composed of Br. Joseph M. Davis, S.M. Charles Hammock, Sr. Martin de Porres Grey, R.S.M., Fr. Larry Lucas, Joseph Dulin, and Estelle Collins.

² Joseph M. Davis and Cyprian Lamar Rowe, "The Development of the National Office for Black Catholics," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 2/3, The Black Catholic Community 1880–1987 (Spring–Summer, 1988), 273.

³ "U.S. Black Christians Score Race Gaps in Christian Religions," *Jet* (Oct. 28, 1971), 24.

described the events in less conflictual terms: in the group's meeting with Benelli, they "presented him with comprehensive documentation on the situation of Black Catholics in the United States Church."

Although the delegation did not achieve any concrete goals, it was nevertheless a theologically dense moment in the Black Catholic Movement. The National Office of Black Catholics (NOBC) was formed in 1970, following the founding of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus and the National Black Sisters Conference in 1968. A planning group made up of representatives of the NBCCC, the NBSC, and Black laypeople met to discuss the possibility of the formation of a Black Catholic vicariate, an ecclesiastical territorial jurisdiction designated in locations where the missionary church has achieved a greater degree of independence and self-sufficiency. A Black vicariate appeared to be a logical development. Since the Third Council of Baltimore in 1884, Black Catholic institutions were supported financially by the Commission for Catholic Missions Among the Negro and Indian People, which established a yearly fundraising campaign in 1887. Black people were considered, through this lens, as passive recipients of white missionary agency. But in 1969, according to these newly formed Black Catholic organizations, they were now a missionary people, agents of evangelization. This intuition aligned with the recognition of the independence and self-sufficiency of the African churches. When representatives met with a consulting firm funded by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) and worked on a plan that would become the NOBC. The momentum around a Black vicariate in the United States was lost, though concerns about independent Black Catholic leadership remained. At the 1969 meeting of Catholic bishops, the NCCB offered \$150,000 to fund the NOBC. The representatives of the Black Catholic organizations learned of the offer at a press conference and refused to receive "one penny of the racist money."⁴ The NOBC, however, though lacking the formal independence and authority of an ecclesiastical territory, took on many of the functions of a "local church" in the post-Vatican II era. It interpreted the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the liturgy, developed liturgical norms and created extensive training programs in liturgy. It formed priestly and lay ministers and created catechetical programs. And it interpreted Conciliar documents and postconciliar teaching on education and developed educational programming for the Black Catholic Church. The NOBC did not exclusively perform these roles

⁴ Davis and Rowe, "The Development of the National Office for Black Catholics," 272.

but acted in coordination and communication with priestly and religious groups, diocesan organizations and lay Black Catholics operating primarily on the local level.

The 1971 NOBC delegation to the Vatican was an expression of Catholic Black Power of the late 1960s and early 1970s. But more than simply a protest, the NOBC delegation to the Vatican had the features of an *ad limina apostolorum* (literally, "to the threshold of the apostles"), a direct meeting, traditionally held every five years, between the bishops of a geographical region and the pope. In this case, it was a delegation of a priest, a religious sister and a religious brother, and laypeople delivering a formal report on the status of Black Catholics in the United States.

From this perspective, the visit manifested a distinctive set of commitments circulating among Black Catholics after Vatican II. These were not just the politics of Black Power. Rather, they were a knotted set of theological commitments regarding Black Catholic belonging, ecclesiology, and reception that arose from the pastoral commitments of Black Catholics and occasioned by the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council affirmed significance of the particular church, that is, the church on the scale of the diocese united with the bishop. In the newly independent nations in Africa, the theology of the local church expressed the African "concern with becoming an autonomous church, led by native clergy and not treated as an immature ward of the old churches of Europe."⁵ In the United States, Black Catholics likewise asserted that *they are a local church*.⁶ The rediscovery of the importance of the Black Catholic church as the local church drove the energy around new pastoral projects, produced tensions, and animated theological development. The NOBC delegation went to Rome with the expectation that they would be received as representatives of the local church.

In this essay, I take the local church as the starting point for the theological understanding of reception. In the postconciliar context, reception was described as the active, creative acceptance of a council's

⁵ Francisco F. Claver, *The Making of a Local Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 14.

⁶ Echoing the concerns of the African churches, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus Statement of 1968 envisioned Black Catholics "directing," "administering," "leading" the church. See "A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, 1968," 111–114 in *Stamped with the Image of God?: African Americans as God's Image in Black*, edited by Cyprian Davis, OSB and Jaime Phelps, OP, *American Catholic Identities: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).

teaching. It is my contention that in post-Vatican II Black Catholic ecclesiology reception was understood principally as *the welcome of the Word of God* and consequently as *the welcome of those who bear the Word*. Black Catholic theology would also criticize the failure of the American Catholic Church to recognize and welcome the Word active in the Black Catholic community.

I. Interpreting Vatican II in Black Catholic Contexts

Interpreting how Black Catholics in the US interpreted and received the Second Vatican Council is not a straightforward task. Black Catholic communities do not neatly map onto the interpretive frameworks that emerged following the Second Vatican Council. Historian Matthew Cressler observes, "Black Catholics have been left on the margins of inquiry because they are not easily incorporated into our comfortable narratives. But if we move Black Catholics from the margins to the center, new narratives emerge."⁷ The need for such a shift is especially true when it comes to questions arising after the Second Vatican Council: the questions and problems of Black Catholic communities were interconnected with those of White communities but were not the same.

This is particularly true of the question of reception. Cecilia Moore, a historian of Black Catholics, questions whether the term *reception* even accurately describes Black Catholics after the council. In lieu of a narrowly defined reception history, she prefers to speak of Black Catholic *response* to Vatican II:

Reception seems to mean how theologians and other academics interpret the documents. It's not talking about how it affects the average person. But Black Catholics were concerned with how Vatican II and its documents affected the average person. You did not have many Black Catholics write articles about 'what *Gaudium et spes* means.' Black Catholics were looking at Vatican II documents as license for what they were already involved in or what they wanted to be involved in.⁸

⁷ Matthew J. Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 11.

⁸ Cecilia Moore (historian) personal communication with the author, February 16, 2022.

At the immediate end of the council, Black Catholic communities, lacking significant representation among the ecclesial hierarchy or membership in the theological academy, did not belong to the influential bodies interpreting the Second Vatican Council to the US Catholic Church at a national level. Black Catholics were absent from these spaces. However, as we can see with the 1970 NOBC delegation, they were also actively involved in creating their own spaces.

Moreover, post-conciliar theological discourses concerning the interpretation of the council did not reflect the experiences of Black Catholics. For example, one of the persisting theological debates has been over what, if any, substantive changes to the Catholic Church took place or were ratified at the Second Vatican Council. The answers to these questions have frequently been described as a difference between the hermeneutic of change and the hermeneutic of continuity— theological, practical, or social—within the church.⁹ The hermeneutic of change reads Vatican II as an “event” with a broader historical context and historical afterlives.¹⁰ The emphasis here is that while the council maintains a continuity with tradition, there nevertheless are novel elements that suggest substantive change has occurred. For example, the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on religious liberty and episcopal collegiality certainly evolved from the teaching of the First Vatican Council and the nineteenth-century papacy.¹¹ In contrast, the hermeneutic of continuity finds little rupture between the documents of Vatican II and the doctrinal teaching that preceded it.¹² Kristin Colberg

⁹ For example, in an address to the Roman curia, Pope Benedict XVI describes the problem of implementation of the Second Vatican Council as a problem of “hermeneutics.” He explained that two opposed hermeneutics—a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” and the “hermeneutic of reform”—have struggled in a contest over the authentic meaning and implementation of the council. Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings” (Thursday, 22 December 2005), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html

¹⁰ Joseph A. Komanchak, “Vatican II as an ‘Event,’” in *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?*, ed. David G. Schultenover, (New York: Continuum, 2007), 24–35. See also Giuseppe Albergo and Joseph A. Komanchak, ed. *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995–2006).

¹¹ Whereas religious liberty was among the errors condemned by the 1864 Syllabus of Errors of Pope Pius IX, the right to religious freedom was affirmed in *Dignitatis humanae* at Vatican II. And while the First Vatican Council affirmed a maximalist view of papal jurisdiction and authority, the Second Vatican Council. See Richard R. Gaillardetz and Catherine E. Clifford, *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012).

¹² See, Agostino Marchetto, *Il Concilio ecumenico Vaticano II: Contrappunto per la sua storia* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2005), and Matthew L. Lamb and

astutely observes that behind assertions of change or continuity are fundamental differences in ecclesiology and the notion of reception.¹³

For our purposes, the debates over continuity and change fundamentally concern the European Catholic experience of continuity or change. For example, Joseph Ratzinger marked 1968 as a moment of cultural upheaval that challenged his understanding of church in the contemporary world. Tracey Rowland explains that during the council, Ratzinger hoped to foster the horizontal-social dimensions of the church and the solidarity of the church with the world. After 1968, she explains, Ratzinger was more concerned with "strengthening the Church's vertical dimension, the authority of the hierarchy, including the papacy."¹⁴ The experiences of cultural rupture—riots in European capitals, the sexual revolution, the protests against the Vietnam War, the Stonewall riots—formed the context for his understanding of what happened at Vatican II. The hermeneutics of rupture and continuity are concerned with interpreting ruptures of particular social arrangements associated with European and North Atlantic modernity.

For Catholics in many African countries 1960 may be a more significant year than 1968. In 1960, Togo, Mali, Senegal, Madagascar, Congo, Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, the Central African Republic, and Mauritania achieved independence. Decolonization was a cultural and political rupture. At the same time, the growing self-sufficiency of African ecclesial institutions was in continuity with the past and the teaching of Vatican II. As in Africa, in a US context, one must also move beyond the Euro-American ecclesial subject. The question, "what substantive changes took place at the council," the Black and indigenous churches answer these questions in different ways.

One approach to the historical interpretation of the council has been to turn to local receptions of the council. In an effort to build upon, yet move beyond, a dichotomy of continuity and change, in *Catholics in the Vatican II Era*, Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Timothy Matovina, and Robert Orsi introduced the local church or diocese as the principal subject of study. They note that the "historical significance of the

Matthew Levering, *The Reception of Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³ Kristin Colberg, "The Hermeneutics of Vatican II: Reception, Authority, and the Debate Over the Council's Interpretation," *Horizons* 38, no. 2 (2011), 231.

¹⁴ See Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13. See also Thomas V. Gourlay and Daniel Matthys, eds., *1968—Culture and Counterculture: A Catholic Critique* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

council... is best examined at the combustive points where the council's messages, aspirations, and fears, explicit and implied, intended and unintended, met up most explosively with the particular circumstances of the modern world."¹⁵ These "combustive points" are the particular circumstances of the diocesan church, the communities from which the participants in the council came and the communities that received the conciliar teaching. For Cummings, Matovina, and Orsi, the diocese is the appropriate "scale" at which to assess the interpretation and impact of the council.¹⁶ This methodological shift resonates with the centrifugal tendencies of the council itself. By turning to the local church, one also is turning to the diverse local receptions of the council.

Capturing the impact of the Second Vatican Council, requires not only a shift to local communities but also a shift to particular communities whose interpretation and reception have been overlooked. The frameworks by which Vatican II has been interpreted do not lend themselves to an adequate understanding of what unfolded within Black Catholic communities. What does the Second Vatican Council and its reception look like if we begin from Black Catholic communities and Black Catholic theological reflection in the postconciliar period?

II. Reception and Ecclesiology

In the modern era, the term *reception* denoted the acceptance of conciliar teaching by local churches, which could involve historically extenuated processes. Theories of reception of law inherited from medieval canon law interpretation (Gratian) tended to construe reception as the process by which a law or decree is received from an external authority or from another community. This characterized doctrinal reception as a process by which synodal decrees are accepted and integrated into the community life of local churches. Theologian Richard McBrien describes reception as a "process by which the body of the faithful... accepts and abides by an official teaching or disciplinary decree of the hierarchical church."¹⁷ As Richard Gaillardetz explains,

¹⁵ Kathleen Sprows Cummings, Timothy Matovina, Robert A. Orsi, eds., *Catholics in the Vatican II Era: Local Histories of a Global Event* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), xii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁷ Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 322. See Thomas P. Rausch, "Note: Reception Past and Present," *Theological Studies* 47 (1986): 497–508. Gerald O'Collins, "Theological

reception has often been taken to be “exogenous” process, that is, as a development originating from an external source, as from an outside authority. Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering, in their introduction to the edited volume *The Reception of Vatican II* (2017), describe reception in precisely in terms of acceptance of an external teaching. They explain that the volume is concerned with “the ways in which the documents of Vatican II, as interpreted by the Magisterium and also by theologians, have contributed to the handing on of the Gospel.”¹⁸ Reception principally refers to acceptance of *teaching*, a content in written form promulgated by ecclesial authority. While they do not foreclose other meanings, “reception” could be taken as a formal, passive intellectual or legal adherence. At the same time, with their reference to “handing on the Gospel,” Lamb and Levering imply—without exactly spelling out—a richer sense of handing on and receiving the Word, one that is suggested in the documents of Vatican II.

A theory of reception is, ultimately, implicated in an ecclesiology. As Gaillardetz observes, within a hierarchical and “hierocratic view of the church,” the active role of the receiving community and the transformative effects of reception are diminished.¹⁹ In the post-Tridentine church and especially in the nineteenth-century church, the centralization of authority in the Vatican contributed to an understanding of reception as passive adherence to decrees from Rome. Comparing the Counter-Reformation ecclesiology with the early church, Hermann Pottmeyer explains, “the meaning of ‘reception’ in the early church is closely connected with its structure and self-understanding as a *communio ecclesiarum*, in contrast to the centrally-governed Church into which the Roman Catholic Church has evolved since the Counter-Reformation.... ‘Reception’ as it was known and used in the early church was a characteristic expression of this fabric of relationships.”²⁰ Whereas a hierocratic understanding of the church led to a formal-canonical view of reception, a communion ecclesiology produces a theory of reception in which reception is communicative and in which the local church has agency in discerning and creatively applying teaching and practice.

Studies and the Reception of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020): 26–39.

¹⁸ Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering, *The Reception of Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

¹⁹ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 229.

²⁰ Hermann J. Pottmeyer, “Reception and Submission,” *The Jurist* 51 (1991), 269.

The form of the documents of Vatican II challenged a formal and legalistic view of reception.²¹ Kristin Colberg explains, "Vatican II illumines the answer [of hermeneutics] in its own texts and speaks to the proper understanding of reception."²² She argues that Vatican II rediscovered the significance of the "local church" as possessing the fulness of the church, thereby emphasizing a "two-way exchange" between Rome and the local church. Vatican II recognized a complex relationship between local authority and universal authority. Moreover, Colberg, explains, Vatican II reaffirmed the teaching of Vatican I, yet contextualized it. Reception, as understood in the documents of Vatican II, is a historical and "dynamic process."

The Second Vatican Council pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* was revolutionary in its genre. And it required a new way of reading a conciliar document and a different understanding of reception. The reception of a conciliar teaching or decree, as interpreted in Latin canonical tradition, is principally an application of law to particular circumstances. As such, it follows a deductive method, considering the authority who is teaching (an Ecumenical Council or an individual bishop), the level of certainty that a teaching claims (a definitive dogma or a non-definitive decree), and its range of application. This method of interpretation does not correspond to the genre of *Gaudium et spes*, which is not a legal decree. First, *Gaudium et spes* was the first ecumenical council document that addresses itself to the entire world, which ostensibly include those who do not see themselves as subject to the decrees of an ecumenical council. Second, it named itself as a "Pastoral Constitution," one which does not issue disciplinary or dogmatic decrees, but rather begins with a description of the realities affecting the modern world. Third, the first section of *Gaudium et spes* is an interpretation of the situation of humanity in modernity that is sociological in nature, carrying out a task of "scrutinizing the signs of the times and...interpreting them in light of the Gospel."²³ As Carlos Schickendantz describes, *Gaudium et spes* embodied "an important methodological innovation in the history of the conciliar magisterium and the development of theological science," namely a shift towards a new "descriptive and inductive" point of departure.²⁴ It signaled a "relatively

²¹ See, Colberg, "The Hermeneutics of Vatican II," 235.

²² *Ibid.*, 246.

²³ *Gaudium et spes*, 4.

²⁴ Carlos Schickendantz, "Una Forma relativamente nueva de teología. Recepción de la transformación metolológica de «Gaudium et spes» en Estados Unidos," *Estudios eclesiásticos* 95, no. 372 (Marzo 2020), 115. Translation mine.

new form of theology."²⁵ The content of *Gaudium et spes* describes the opening of the church to a dialogue with the world and the churches receptivity to understanding the various situations and contexts of human life. The reception of the document is difficult to reduce to a passive process of accepting doctrinal teaching. Instead, reception of the document requires an imitative gesture of turning toward the local contexts of human life and reflecting from those grounds.

The twentieth-century *ressourcement* of patristic communion ecclesologies and the ecclesial vision of Vatican II led to theological reassessment of reception following the council.²⁶ New theories of reception depended upon research into patterns of reception in the early church. Alois Grillmeier highlighted the processes of reception as exchanges between external churches.²⁷ As Gaillardetz notes, Grillmeier was concerned with ecumenical relationships in the contemporary period.²⁸ But as Grillmeier's studies about the reception of the Council of Chalcedon suggest, he was considering the protracted history of the reception, contradiction (*Widerspruch*), and doctrinal reconciliation between local churches. Yves Congar responded to Grillmeier by affirming yet broadening his account. Congar argued that Grillmeier had overstated the "exogenous" character of reception and overemphasized the autonomous nature of the churches.²⁹ For Congar, the local churches are not simply autonomous because they are already constituted as one in and through communion with each another. Reception, he explains, "derives from a theology of communion, itself associated with a theology

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The non-reception of Vatican II and postconciliar doctrinal teaching also prompted consideration of reception as a theological theme. Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's infamous rejection of the Mass of Paul VI, his Catholic exclusivism, and rejection of the principle of religious liberty raised prompted theological evaluations of non-reception or the historically extended reception of doctrine and practice. Also relevant is the non-reception of *Humanae vitae* (1968) by large numbers of Catholics.

²⁷ See Alois Grillmeier, "Konzil und Rezeption. Methodische Bemerkungen zu einem Thema der ökumenischen Diskussion der Gegenwart," *Theologie und Philosophie* 45 (1970): 321-52. See also, Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche. 2.1. Das Konzil von Chalcedon (451) - Rezeption und Widerspruch (451 - 518)* (Freiburg/Basel/Bern: Herder, 1986).

²⁸ Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Reception of Doctrine: New Perspectives," in Bernard Hoose ed., *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church* (London: Ashgate, 2002), 96. See also Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority*, 226-227.

²⁹ See Yves Congar, "Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality," in *Readings in Church Authority: Gifts and Challenges for Contemporary Catholicism*, Gerard Mannion, Richard Gaillardetz, Jan Kerkhofs, and Kenneth Wilson, eds. (Burlington, Vermont/Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003), 317-325. Originally published as Yves Congar, "La 'réception' comme réalité ecclésiologique," in *Église et papauté: Regards historiques* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 229-66.

of local churches, a pneumatology, and a theology of tradition and a sense of profound conciliarity of the Church."³⁰ The decree of a council—like that of Vatican II—is not simply a juridical decision handed down. Rather, it is an expression of the “essential conciliarity” of the church.³¹ As such, reception of conciliar teaching is the historical continuation or extension of this essential conciliarity. Gaillardetz explains, “reception denoted a constitutive process in the church’s self-realization in history.”³² For Congar, reception cannot be understood as the acceptance of a juridical decision external to the receiving church because the church itself is essentially conciliar, that is, structured by its being in communion with the other churches.³³

Beyond the structural features of conciliarity/reception elaborated in the postconciliar literature, Congar related the conciliarity of the early church to a theology of interpersonal communion. Conciliarity in the church reflects the trinitarian communion of persons. Thus, conciliarity should be understood as both a structural relationship and as an interpersonal exchange. Congar states, “Perhaps the greatest difference between ancient patristic ecclesiology and modern ecclesiology is that the former included anthropology, while the latter is merely the theory of a system, a book of public law.... The anthropology of patristic ecclesiology is that of a human communion, which finds its full authenticity in and through that communion, because it rediscovers a resemblance to God. This is the meeting place of the anthropology and the ecclesiology, and it is this ‘communicating humanity’ which is the

³⁰ Congar, “Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality,” 321–22.

³¹ Yves Congar, “The Council as an Assembly and the Church as Essentially Conciliar,” in *Yves M.-J. Congar, OP*, Martin Redfern, ed. (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 116.

³² Gaillardetz, “The Reception of Doctrine,” 96. Summarizing the postconciliar conversation around reception, Gaillardetz describes the features of reception as a historical process involving people who receive a teaching or practice as members of a community. He describes four features: (a) Reception occurs through an “active discernment” of what is received; (b) reception is a creative process that is a transformation of the community and a transformation of what is received; (c) reception can extend over long periods of time; (d) and ecclesial reception is “grounded in the reception of the living Word of God.” Gaillardetz, “The Reception of Doctrine,” 98.

³³ See also Hermann J. Pottmeyer, “Reception and Submission,” *The Jurist* 51 (1991), 269–292;

Jean-Marie R. Tillard, “Tradition, Reception,” in *The Quadrilog: Essays in Honor of George H. Tavard*, Kenneth Hagan, ed. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 328–43; Jean-Marie R. Tillard, *L’Église locale: Ecclésiologie de communion et catholicité* (Paris : Cerf, 1995).

subject of the Church's actions and attributes."³⁴ It is *within* the communion of disciples who seek God that God appears. Congar explains, "God intervenes and acts where several are gathered together. It was when the apostles were gathered together in prayer that they received the Holy Spirit."³⁵ He writes, "The theological event of the Holy Spirit is conditioned by the anthropological truth according to which we refashion within ourselves the image of God."³⁶ A council formalizes the normal activity of the church in which the communion of believers is the locus of the Spirit's activity. The reception of the Spirit's activity within an ecumenical council is social, for it takes place within the gathering and human communion.

Congar's recovery of reception as a feature of communion ecclesiology helps one to understand Black Catholic reception. Communion ecclesiology also implies an anthropology of communion, for which the human being is shaped to God's likeness through communion. As a result, reception, as an exchange between churches, reflects active relationships of gift and welcome among persons. As I will show, Black Catholic ecclesiology developed an understanding of reception principally in its subjective dimensions, as welcome of the Word and the welcome of those who bear the word within them.

III. Welcome: The Practice and Theory of Reception in Black Catholicism

As noted above, postconciliar theories of reception emphasize reception as *constitutive* of the church, part of a creative process that may extend over generations, and as a process that is transformative of the community. Black Catholic reflection on the church after the Second Vatican Council, whether given a scholarly or pastoral expression, developed the subjective dimensions of reception rather than the juridical. In other words, it concerns principally how persons are received into ecclesial community or between ecclesial communities. Rather than thinking about reception principally the formulation of principles designed for diocesan contexts or conferences of bishops,

³⁴ Yves Congar, "The Council as an Assembly and the Church as Essentially Conciliar," in *Theologians Today: Yves M.-J. Congar, OP* (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 116.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

Black Catholic ecclesiology took the local ecclesial community as its methodological starting point.

As I will argue, *welcome* became a prominent image for God's reception of Black humanity and for the church's hospitality to the Word of God. In what follows, I examine two characteristics of the Black Catholic understanding of reception in the writings of Black Catholic theologians in the two decades following the Second Vatican Council.

1. Black Catholic ecclesiology reflected a subjective understanding of reception. Reception is *welcoming* the Word of God. But, first, welcome is the hospitality God shows to us, by welcoming our full humanity. The principal image of reception, the welcome table, requires a mutuality between persons and communities. In imitation of Jesus's practice of the "open table," hospitality to the Word requires hospitality to the outcast.
2. Reception is also a social reception, that is, a recognition of and hospitality to the *community* that has received Christ. As such, the welcome table constitutes a challenge to the American church that fails to properly welcome the Word operating within the Black Catholic community, suggesting an incomplete transformation by the Word in White American churches.

Few Black Catholic theologians were writing in the period directly following the council, leaving the scholarly archive quite thin.³⁷ I draw from Black theological and ecclesiastical writings from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.³⁸ My purpose is not an exhaustive account of the theme

³⁷ There was only one African American member of the Catholic Theological Society of America before 1970. Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Theological Society of America: A Story of Seventy-Five Years* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021), 55.

³⁸ It is evident, however, that the theological archive must be expanded beyond what I have consulted here, principally clerical sources. There were many priests, religious, and laity who interpreted and implemented Vatican II's documents and mandates concerning liturgy, sacred song, education, catechesis, social justice, and spirituality within parishes, fraternal organizations (such as The Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary), schools, universities, and other institutions and organizations. The postconciliar Black Catholic archive is constituted by the actions and reflections of Black Catholics doing "church work" and, also, those operating outside its bounds. The experience of Black Catholic laity has been neglected in the research and much remains to be done to record the experiences of Black Catholic laypeople after Vatican II. The organizations founded after the council, including the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus (1968), National Black Sisters

of the welcome table in Black Catholic theology, but rather to establish that *welcome* is a significant element within a Black Catholic understanding of reception.

A. God's Welcome of Black Humanity and Black Reception of Jesus

While the Second Vatican Council lacked a developed theology of reception, it nevertheless proclaimed an ecclesiology in which the church is principally the locus of the reception of Christ. Kristin Colberg explains that in the conciliar teachings "the Christian community is fundamentally a community of reception by recognizing that the Church exists precisely where men and women encounter Christ and, in turn, proclaim the good news in word and deed."³⁹ Gilles Routhier explains that Vatican II used the Latin verb *accipere* to describe "the action of welcoming and receiving."⁴⁰ The Church, he says, is "a place of welcome or reception of the visit of God."⁴¹

Black Catholics following the Second Vatican Council developed a theology of welcome drawing from the Negro Spirituals in which reception is an active preparation of space, spirit, and community. The "welcome table" is among the most significant images for reception. It is an image derived from the Negro Spiritual "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," later revived in the civil rights era. The welcome table became a multivalent metaphor for Christian community and for liturgical gathering. It describes the table fellowship practiced by Jesus as well as the practice that his followers must take for proper hospitality and reception of him. Welcome places reception of teaching, doctrine, or practices in a biblical and eucharistic context of the reception of the living Word of God. This sense of reception—as the subject's or community's hospitality to the Word—finds articulations in the Jewish Rabbinic transmission of the oral Torah and in the New Testament apostolic missions. In the New Testament, reception cannot be limited to the assent to objective content but also requires the reception of the

Conference (1968), the National Office for Black Catholics (1970), the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, and the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (1980) are also sources for the Black Catholic implementation of the council.

³⁹ Colberg, "The Hermeneutics of Vatican II," 247.

⁴⁰ Gilles Routhier, "Reception in Current Theological Debate," *The Jurist* 57 (1997), 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31. See also Gilles Routhier, *Vatican II: herméneutique et réception* (Saint-Laurent, Québec: Fides, 2006).

subject, that is, Jesus and the apostles.⁴² To receive them is to welcome them, to take them into one's village and home, and to offer hospitality. The biblical terms for reception correspond with Latin terms *tradere* and *traditio*, "to pass on." Yves Congar explains, "Tradition is not merely the mechanical transmission of a passive deposit of faith. The very concept implies the delivery of an object from the possession of one person to another, and therefore the transition from one living being to another. It is *incorporated* into a *subject*, a *living* subject."⁴³ To *welcome*, therefore, is not a passive juridical acceptance but rather an active preparation of the space and the community for a more authentic or complete hospitality to God.

At the 1978 meeting of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, the Black Catholic church was a community of reception of the Word that exists because God first welcomed them. Father Moses B. Anderson, S.S.E. described the priority of God's action:

Blacks called upon the God they knew in Africa, a God who had revealed Himself to us in our struggle with the harsh realities of our world. This God had given to us a sense of our own worth... He had given to us an awareness that there is evil, pain, and injustice living side by side with good, joy, and charity. Our God had given to us also faith and hope that mankind through his religious daily life could overcome all pain, evil, injustice, and a host of other malevolent conditions.⁴⁴

⁴² In the parable of the sower, Jesus refers to the seeds sown in good soil as those who "hear the word and accept [παραδέχομαι] it." (Mark 4:20, New Revised Standard Version). Acts refers to those who "welcomed his [Peter's] message" (Acts 2:41 NRSV). It reads literally "having received the word of him" (ἀποδεξάμενοι τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ). The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians they "in turn received" (παρῆλθετε) the good news he "proclaimed" to them (1 Cor 15:1). To the Colossians, he says they have "received Jesus Christ the Lord" (Col 2:6). And to the Thessalonians, Paul says they "received from us how you ought to live" (1 Thess 4:1). Paul uses the Rabbinic terms for passing down and receiving the oral Torah. *λαμβάνει* alternately describes "everyone who asks receives" (Matt 7:8; Luke 11:10), those who "take up the cross" (Matt 10:38), those who "receive" Jesus (John 13:20), and Jesus who "received the bread and gave thanks" (Jn 21:13). The Apostles themselves are received or not received by the people to whom they preach. In the context of preaching, what is handed on and received is principally the Word in person, but also the proclamation of the gospel, and ethical codes.

⁴³ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 112.

⁴⁴ Moses B. Anderson, "Self-Identity—A Christian Concept," *Theology: A Portrait in Black: Proceedings of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium 1* (1980), 46. In

From Africa, Anderson explained, they carried and transmitted their own notion of God and relationship with God. He suggested that a false narrative of creation—in which Whites were the agents of racial and spiritual elevation of Blacks—was deployed to justify a system of slavery and racial inequality. White people understood themselves to be the architects of Black identity. Anderson stated that the racist “denies the total being of a people.”⁴⁵ Theologically, Anderson explained, a racist theology of creation constitutes a refusal to recognize that God is the architect of Black identity. Black people were created by God, not by White racism. For Anderson, God has created a people who were always part of God’s history and salvific plan, and to whom God is revealed.

Father Glenn V. Jeanmarie expanded upon the question of God’s reception of Black humanity as Black. He wrote, “society has not affirmed that God in His Goodness and Kindness has created me Black in His Image. For society Blackness is only an accident of my existence and has no relation to the essence of my personhood.” In this theology, salvation means to leave “behind him his old evil self—that Blackness—and become pure, White, and Catholic.”⁴⁶ Without naming his theological opponents, Jeanmarie argued that Catholic soteriology had been presented as the salvation of human nature, but prescinding from Black culture, experience, and history. He suggested the Aristotelian-neo-Scholastic substance/accident dichotomy is recruited to interpret race. *Substance* refers something that exists in itself and not another thing, like human nature. *Accident* refers something that adheres in a thing but does not change it into a different thing, like skin tone. In the same volume, Father Bede Abram, critiqued the neo-Scholastic dichotomy for race:

What is of primary importance is man, the substance. Therefore, we are all human beings and color is accidental. This thinking process can easily separate personhood from blackness. But what has happened to us as people of color has in fact given real substance to color. However, we still hear let’s have less talk about color and more about our common nature, personhood. Yet, the

1982, Moses Anderson was ordained and auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Detroit.

⁴⁵ Moses B. Anderson, “Self-Identity—A Christian Concept,” *Theology: A Portrait in Black: Proceedings of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium 1* (1980), 45

⁴⁶ Glenn V. Jeanmarie, “Black Catholic Worship: Celebrating Roots and Wings,” *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, 76.

non-acceptance of blackness is the incompleteness of personhood. It was precisely [to] this incompleteness that Christ came. It is in our blackness that we accept the grace of God's freedom, to be who we are.⁴⁷

The skin tone described as "black" is an accident, that is, something that does not make someone a different human species. However, Black as an identity—a cultural and social identity with a distinctive history (and perhaps epistemology and rhetoric)—does touch the "substance" of the person. What I wish to draw attention to is not the limitations of neo-Scholastic theological anthropology to address race. Rather, I want to point out how Abram and Jeanmarie affirmed that God encounters and accepts Black humanity in its historical and cultural particularity. The fact that God welcomes Black people—with their distinctive culture, community, and history—means that the Black Catholic community exists and begins through God's reception.

Additionally, Black ecclesiology after the Second Vatican Council contended that Black humanity is transformed into a gift to God and the church, especially through liturgy. Again, many of the essays in *Theology: A Portrait in Black* touched upon liturgy and worship. They highlighted the liturgy as an act in which the humanity received by God is now given as a gift to God. Father Clarence Rivers stated, "I came to understand it was not enough for us to introduce black music into the liturgy but that it was necessary to bring the whole range of black culture to bear on our worship efforts."⁴⁸ Jeanmarie described the "surrender of our whole person" in the liturgy. Sister Thea Bowman, present at the 1978 conference, would later eloquently capture the implications of God's reception of Black humanity in her 1989 address to the US Bishops: "What does it mean to be Black and Catholic? It means that I come to my Church fully functioning. That doesn't frighten you, does it? I come to my Church fully functioning. I bring myself, my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become, I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African

⁴⁷ Bede Abram, "Black Christian Values from a Black Perspective," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, 33

⁴⁸ Clarence Joseph Rivers, "Thank God We Ain't What We Was: The State of the Liturgy in the Black Catholic Community," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, 70.

American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as a gift to the Church."⁴⁹

The Black Catholic church is a community of reception because, first, it has been received by God. Second, it is a community of reception because it is a community through which the faith has been passed on and received. Just as Anderson described the African experience of God, other postconciliar theology traced the faith back through the mediation of their ancestors rather than the mediation of White masters. In the 1984 pastoral letter written by ten Black bishops, *"What We Have Seen and Heard"*, the bishops remembered those who were responsible for their own evangelization. They included White priests, religious and laypeople. But they state, "those of us who have grown up in the Faith owe this faith to the Black men and women who have gone before us strong in the Faith and steadfast in their personal conviction." They name their "fathers," "mothers," and "all our ancestors" who passed on the faith "despite the peculiar structures of racism and bondage that marred the Catholic Church in America."⁵⁰ The document describes the vocation of Black Catholics to share what has been passed to them by their faithful ancestors. The Black Catholic church is a community of reception because it continues to pass on its experience of God.

Building upon a sense of active reception of the Word of God, the "Welcome Table" became an image of both worship and praxis, the imitation of Jesus's practice of reception. The welcome table is multivalent. At once it describes God's reception of humanity, welcoming them to the banquet, and the human reception of the Word, in liturgy, Eucharist, and through table fellowship. Father Joseph Brown, SJ describes the liturgy celebrated at the 1992 National Black Catholic Congress in New Orleans: the worship space was prepared by twelve women who swept the area with palm branches and "tamped" the dust by sprinkling water; six men built the altar on three overturned iron pots; then, twelve Black bishops processed in to celebrate the liturgy. He asserted, "The people who had been the oppressed race, the despised nation, the orphans of their own history and cultures, not only found a seat at the 'welcome table'; they finally understood that they

⁴⁹ Thea Bowman, "Sr. Thea Bowman's Address to the U.S. Bishop's Conference, June 1989," USCCB, Subcommittee on African American Affairs, accessed May 24, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/resources/upload/Transcript-Sr-Thea-Bowman-June-1989-Address.pdf>

⁵⁰ Joseph L. Howze, et. al., *'What We Have Seen and Heard': A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1984), 3.

had to build the table for themselves.”⁵¹ By building the welcome table, they dramatize their preparation for and reception of Jesus as the guest who now inhabits their home. Moreover, it affirms that Jesus is given hospitality with the cultural, historical, and culinary gifts they possess. God receives Black people with the fullness of their community and culture.

Receiving the Word is liturgical and, at the same time, a practice of the open table. Bryan Massingale describes the welcome table as a “subversion” of social norms and a theological image for justice. Massingale explains that the welcome table expresses justice in a “concrete, direct, and immediate” way, as “being recognized with respect, treated with dignity, welcomed as an equal in social and cultural life, and regarded as fit to be invited to the table.”⁵² The welcome table is not only a demand of justice, but also a demand of discipleship. Discipleship is an imitative practice. Because our humanity has been fully received by Jesus at the table of welcome, so Christian practice requires the practice of the open table. M. Shawn Copeland explains,

Jesus acted out just how unrestricted neighbor love must be, just how much ‘other’ bodies matter. The open table embodied the desire for and the design of the reign of God. All are welcome. God sets the table for the ‘little ones,’ for those denied access to restorative moments of celebration, to the material benefits of culture and society. Jesus invites all who follow him to abandon loyalties of class and station, family and kin, culture and nation in order to form God’s people anew and, thus, to contest empire.⁵³

For Copeland, the welcome table is the practice of Jesus and expresses God’s intention for human relationship. The open table is an ethic directed toward the marginalized. But the marginalized too, are bearers of the Word. *Welcome* is the practice that the church must engage to receive the Word.

⁵¹ Joseph A. Brown, “Preparing the ‘Welcome Table,” in *Vatican II: Fifty Personal Stories*, William Madges and Michael J. Daley, eds., (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 56.

⁵² Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 139.

⁵³ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 62.

My purpose here was to describe multivalent meanings of welcome as it was interpreted in the postconciliar period as a practice of reception of the Word and hospitality towards the stranger. The welcome table is an image of reception that overwhelmingly favors the subjective element. In Black Catholic understandings of reception, assent to doctrine is inseparable from welcoming the living Word and those who carry the Word with them.

B. Reception of the Community that Has Received Christ

The Second Vatican Council's ratification of communion ecclesiology was enshrined in *Lumen gentium* (1964). *Lumen gentium* presented the church as the locus of communion of humanity with God and among human beings. The document affirmed that diverse local congregations are a community in which the Church of Christ is truly present.⁵⁴ Furthermore, *Lumen gentium* proclaimed an ecclesiology in which each local church is constituted in its relationships of communion with the churches throughout the world. Each church, through its relationships with other churches contributes its diverse gifts to the mission of unity. According to *Lumen gentium*, "Between all the parts of the Church there remains a bond of close communion whereby they share spiritual riches, apostolic workers and temporal resources."⁵⁵ In the vision of the Second Vatican Council, each local congregation is itself the locus of communion with God, yet it is also networked within the communion between local churches. Church is a "sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race," then it achieves this union through the communion between churches.⁵⁶ Over forty years ago, at the first meeting of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, Black Catholic theologians observed that racism impeded properly ecclesial forms of relationship. Because the White American church failed to recognize and receive Black Catholic communities as equal members of this

⁵⁴ *Lumen gentium* (November 21, 1964), §26, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (hereafter cited as *LG*). The council's *Christus Dominus* (1965) reiterated this ecclesiology in which the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative" in the local church united with its pastor. Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus: Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church* (October 28, 1965), §11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html

⁵⁵ *LG*, §13.

⁵⁶ *LG*, §1.

communion, the church failed to embody the vision of the Second Vatican Council.

The communion ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium* suggests that communion experienced in the church—in the local congregation and among local churches—must be historical and social to be real. Yet, sadly, Catholics around the world are often connected to each other through networks of exploitation rather than by the bonds of charity. Vincent Miller argues that the Pope Francis has sought to establish properly ecclesial relationships, forms of communication, and connectivity within the church that function as alternatives to capitalism. He offers the Synod on the Amazon as an example: Miller has argued that

The Amazon Synod was not simply a moment when the Catholic Church listened to the wisdom and crisis of peoples and ecosystems that were previously unknown to it. The church is already there, but its members are connected through global extractive networks rather than properly ecclesial relationships. The Amazon Synod was noteworthy as a moment when the church established a truly ecclesial network of communication among its members—they communicated and related to one another through church networks and practices rather than those of global capitalism.⁵⁷

As Miller observes, neoliberal global networks impose a certain order on human relationships today, impeding the forms of relationship established in Christian community.

The ecclesiological question posed by Black Catholic theologians following the Second Vatican Council concerned the relationship of Black Catholics—who saw themselves as fully Catholic and as a local church—and their relationship to other Catholic communities insofar as these intra-ecclesial relationships were structured by racism. Racism is more than a sin. It refuses the cultivation of properly ecclesial relationships. In other words, racism is the non-recognition and non-reception of communities who have received and bear the Word of God. Sister Jamie Phelps, O.P. developed this idea in her paper “Black Self-Concept” at the

⁵⁷ Vincent J. Miller, “Synodality and the Sacramental Mission of the Church: The Struggle for Communion in a World Divided by Colonialism and Neoliberal Globalization,” *Theological Studies*, vol. 83, no. 1 (2022), 9.

1978 Black Catholic Theological Symposium. Phelps observed that *Ad Gentes* (1965), recognizes the necessity of self-determination local churches. She asserted, "the document states the initial thrust of the Christian community is to form it in such a way so that it will be able to provide for its own needs as far as possible."⁵⁸ She noted that the document suggests each community should eventually have ministers from that community and attain a "diocesan structure." Although Black culture is distinctive from the majority culture in the United States, she explained, the form of mission taken among Black people in the United States has not pursued the objective of cultivating the local Black church.⁵⁹ Phelps explained what the missionary goal should be:

The goal would be the establishment of local churches in which Black life, spiritual, psychological and physical, would be nurtured and enhanced as a gift from God. Such nurturance would benefit the world community since Black persons, thus affirmed, are enabled to contribute their unique gifts to the entire Church and world. Given the interaction of the local churches with their dioceses and their dioceses with the Universal Church, the communion of these local Black churches with other Roman Catholic churches would remain intimate.⁶⁰

Her vision for the local Black Catholic church was one in which it achieves self-sufficiency and the capacity to cultivate its own gifts yet maintains the bonds of charity among other ecclesial communities. In many ways, in her vision for the Black Catholic Church, Phelps anticipated contemporary theologies of synodality.

Other postconciliar Black Catholic reflection on communion ecclesiology addressed the non-reception of the local Black Catholic church by the White American church. In 1974, Father Joseph Nearon, S.S.S, then the sole Black member of the Catholic Theological Society of America, produced the "Preliminary Report" for the Research Committee for Black Theology, which identified the research agenda for the Research Committee. He explained, "the black man who embraces Catholicism finds himself alienated from his 'brothers' and only superficially accepted by his new co-religionists."⁶¹ Nearon describing

⁵⁸ Jamie Phelps, "Black Self-Concept," *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, 58.

⁵⁹ Phelps, "Black Self-Concept," 59.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Joseph R. Nearon, "Preliminary Report: Research Committee for Black Theology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (1974), 414.

Catholic theology as racist, identified the main problem as the non-acceptance of Black people as Catholic: "Blacks have been accepted (or more accurately allowed to join) to the extent that they assimilate to an already established cultural pattern and no one ever even thought that the black Catholic had something to contribute to Catholicism, and especially to Catholic theology, as well as something to receive."⁶² Nearon's observation is of supreme importance. He specified that cultural assimilation is often the precondition for a recognition of Black belonging. Nearon extended these reflections at the first gathering of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium in 1978 in a paper entitled "The Question of the Church." Here he argued that the pattern of belonging to the American Church has been one of reception of Black individuals (though stripped of blackness) and non-reception of Blackness. Within the American Catholic church, he explained, the "home missions" were the vehicle for evangelization of Blacks. This system assumed that "whites needed only to be informed of the 'true faith' in order to be assimilated into the "Universal Church"; blacks needed to be civilized (or if that be too strong a word, then let us say acculturated.)"⁶³ This establishes the reception of Blacks in the church only under strained conditions. He states, individual "blacks may have been accepted or tolerated. Blackness was not and is not."⁶⁴ This form of assimilation establishes Black Catholic belonging within patterns of asymmetrical and nonmutual relationships. The result is that for the Black Catholic, asymmetrical relationships structure of ecclesial communion. Glen Coulthard refers to such a pattern as "racist recognition" or "misrecognition" that constitute an extension of colonial relationship.⁶⁵

Nearon diagnosed the key problem as "cultural arrogance," a false attribution of the Hellenistic/European/American as the universal. "The Western cultural arrogance to which I have referred assumed uncritically that if 'civilized' peoples with their long Christian tradition had such difficulty combatting the centrifugal forces always present when free reign is given to particularity, how much more would the 'true faith' be compromised if the 'primitive' non-European peoples were permitted to

⁶² Ibid., 415.

⁶³ Joseph R. Nearon, "The Question of the Church," in *Theology: A Portrait in Black: Proceedings of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*, no. 1 (1980), 12-13.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁵ See Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

articulate their faith and worship using the forms of their 'pagan superstitions.'"⁶⁶ Nearon observed that "cultural arrogance" has united with a "top down" ecclesiology that attenuates the relative autonomy of the local congregations and communities. In practice, American ecclesiology aligns with a false universalism. It is an ecclesiology for which Black Catholic particularity is understood as a threat to the unity of Catholic teaching and practice. "It is really a threat to some of the things which are American in our Church; namely the racist assumptions included in the definition of American society.... Because the church is incarnate, it must suffer the shortcoming of the society in which it is incarnated. For American society, this means that there is a whole group of us here, who, as far as the society's self-definition is concerned, do not exist."⁶⁷ In Nearon's analysis, the American church has operated with a malformed understanding of the relationship of the universal and the local as a relationship of authoritarian command. This ecclesiology mirrored a view of Black assimilation into the church as conformity to (White) Catholic norms. A virulent admixture of colonialist attitudes, centralized hierocratic ecclesiology, and a racist understanding of national belonging colluded, contributing to the acceptance of Black Catholics only insofar as they conform to Euro-American expectations and assimilate in subordinate roles. This too is a matter of reception. The non-reception of blackness is entangled with the non-reception of the Black local churches.

Nearon suggested that the Second Vatican Council—specifically an ecclesiology of the local church—opens an alternative to uniformity. Since the publication of *Lumen gentium*, he explained,

the decentralization of the church and the importance of the local church have been more and more in the forefront. It is being realized that it is above all in the local community that the Church is actualized. Consideration of the universal Church as rooted and founded in local communities instead of the local church as following from a monolithic "universal Church" is becoming more and more popular.... It also appears to be the proper manner to reduce to institutional reality the principle of unity in diversity.... In an ecclesiology which operates "from the top down" it is difficult to assimilate

⁶⁶ Nearon, "The Question of the Church," 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

this difference. On the other hand, an ecclesiology which starts with the local community, accepts diversity as a 'given' and seeks to find true unity through this diversity rather than imposing uniformity from the top. In a word, such an ecclesiology will understand that unity is not something over and above or along with diversity but that it is constituted by diversity.⁶⁸

In Nearon's critique, a "top down" ecclesiology mirrored the form of Black belonging in the church. But the ecclesiology of Vatican II challenges it. By beginning with the local church, as relatively autonomous and already diverse, there is no need for assimilative practices. Instead, Black belonging is assumed. The council enjoins the recognition of Black Catholic communities as churches to which other Catholic communities are invited to be in relationship.⁶⁹

This ecclesiological emphasis represents a methodological shift in theology, but it also implies a recognition that God is active within Black Catholic communities and that they must be trusted to carry out their mission. Nearon wrote,

Trust is demanded in the presence of the Spirit of God. If indeed the black children of God have also received the Spirit of God, then when they attempt to speak of Christ as their Savior it is under the guidance of the Spirit. ". . . I want you to understand that on the one hand no one can be speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit and say, 'Curse Jesus,' and on the other hand, no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy

⁶⁸ Joseph Nearon, "A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks," 193-94.

⁶⁹ It is along these lines that Jamie T. Phelps, O.P. argued for a rapprochement between communion ecclesiology and Black liberation theology. She showed that the commitment to communion is "integrally connected" to liberation. The call to communion resonates with our deepest desire for liberation from the oppression of dehumanizing patterns of relationships of racism, sexism, and classism manifest by our continued marginalization, devaluation as responsible and active participants of the church mission of ecclesial and social transformation. This call to communion resonates with our deepest desire for inclusion within community of humankind as respected and capable human agents of God's mission. Most marginalized and oppressed peoples passionately desire to be in union with one another and all of humankind and creation. Yet true community is only possible if it is founded in the radical truth of our personal and collective history of joy and sorrow. Jamie T. Phelps, "Communion Ecclesiology and Black Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000), 695.

Spirit" (I Cor 12:3). If this is the providential time that the black community is called to make its contribution to the whole people of God, this must be the work of the Holy Spirit. All involved, black and white, must trust and must pray that the Spirit will bring his work to a successful conclusion.⁷⁰

Nearon's understanding is that if we believe that God is active within Black Catholic communities, they must be free to develop their own evangelical missions. In addition to relative autonomy, recognition of the apostolic faith operating in the Black Catholic community is also elemental to the preservation of communion amongst the churches.⁷¹

Phelps's and Nearon's ecclesiology of the Black local church in the 1970s was shared in various ways by Black Catholic theologians and pastors of the immediate postconciliar period who challenged the majority-White Catholic Church in the United States to welcome the culture and gifts of Black people. The failure of recognition and welcome of the Word who is operative within Black Catholic communities should be understood also as an obstacle to the formation of properly ecclesial relationships among local churches, relationships that are constitutive of the *communio ecclesiarum*.

IV. Conclusion: Communities of Reception

The delegation of the NOBC travelled to Rome in 1970 as representatives of the Black Catholic Church in the United States. This event reflects Black Catholic self-interpretation in the Vatican II era and is a lens into Black Catholic understanding of the Second Vatican Council. While the US hierarchy historically saw Black Catholics ecclesologically as a minority insufficiently assimilated to American Catholicism, Black Catholics interpreted themselves as an emerging local church parallel to the local churches of Africa. An unstated assumption of the delegation was that Black Catholics in the United States possessed a unity and solidity as a local church, possessing all that is

⁷⁰ Joseph Nearon, "A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks," 187.

⁷¹ Jean-Marie Tillard elaborated a theory of recognition (*reconnaissance*) that is part of the interior life of the church. See Jean-Marie Tillard, "Reception, Communion," *One in Christ* 28 (1992): 311. See also, Tillard, "Tradition, Reception" and Brian P. Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity, and Salvation: The Contribution of Jean-Marie Tillard to Systematic Ecclesiology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

necessary for salvation and Catholic mission. Black Catholic belonging, therefore, is independent of White Catholic mediation. Therefore, Black Catholics require synodal representation.

The delegation also communicated an ecclesiological insight cultivated in Black Catholic communities and through reflection on the documents of Vatican II. While Black Catholics certainly produced distinctive interpretations of council documents, they also understood reception differently. For White Catholics, despite the momentous changes brought by the council, the reception of the council was a process that could be carried out without disrupting any current social or ecclesial structures. For Black Catholics, Vatican II's communion ecclesiology and emphasis on the local church required the self-sufficiency and relative autonomy of a Black local, which would be disruptive of social and ecclesial structures. In addition to developing a distinctive communion ecclesiology, Black Catholics also contributed to a theology of reception. The church is constituted by its welcome of the Word, and its recognition and welcome of the Word operative in other communities.

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