

## The Church urgently needs to stop seeing itself as a Western export



Pope Francis' comments on the need for the Church to develop non-Western expressions of the faith are a breath of fresh air. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he wrote: "We cannot demand that peoples of every continent, in expressing their Christian faith, imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history, because the faith cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture." He thus reaffirmed the spirit of the Second Vatican Council that had been obscured in the past decades by a militant restorationism.

Coming from Africa, I have seen how the Church has been Western not only in its liturgy but also in its personnel, finance and theology. Although recent decades have seen dramatic improvements, one can still see how this dependence is not going away soon. While a lot has been achieved in new forms of worship, and today one can speak of Christianity already becoming a truly African religion, a lot remains to be done, particularly in the area of theology.

In his interpretation of the significance of Vatican II, the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner argued that the Church had shifted from being a Western Church to becoming a world Church: Pope Francis is reminding us of what his fellow Jesuit said.

One could point to how developing non-Western theologies could be a risky business. In a way, theologians in Africa, Asia and Latin America are on a pioneering venture: the task of breaking new ground; and it is not guaranteed that they will not fumble and even make mistakes in the process. Who has not made mistakes? Peter? Paul? Tertullian? Augustine? Aquinas? Rahner?

In the Catholic Church and particularly during the last two papacies, we have seen an effort to block the contextualisation and inculturation of Christianity in local cultures. The achievements of Vatican II have been weakened by a call to a uniform, standard, mandatory way for all. Today we know that this presumed standard theology is simply the accumulation of traditions, methodologies, topics and questions that have served to answer the needs of the Western world over the past few centuries.

When the Christian faith came as the Good News to non-Western peoples, there were many elements of its theology that did not address the questions raised by the new believers in any satisfactory or relevant way. The message was then found to be scratching where its hearers did not itch. The task of

non-Western Christians has been to make the Christian message address and challenge these new contexts of people's lives.

Unless this is done, Christian faith will tend to be seen as a system of venerable ancient formulas that make much of issues that very few people (in this case some isolated groups of specialists in Church circles and academia) are interested in.

Worse still, its theology will seem to be an irrelevant exercise of complicated reasoning over matters which make the Christian faith look like the promotion and defence of an outdated system, rather than the welcome promise of a God who liberates and empowers ordinary people.

The Christian faith has shifted its centre of gravity away from the affluent Western nations into countries where the majority are victims of poverty, powerlessness, violence, exploitation, disease and oppression. It is these people in the first place that are waiting to receive the Good News. Theology has to give priority to the task of listening to these people and of seeking ways of speaking about God in ways that make sense to them. Pope Francis' message is thus a welcome reminder and a true message of joy.

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Above: Archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro of Juba, South Sudan, presides over the ordination of three deacons. Photo: CNS/Paul Jeffrey

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