

African Book Events in Nairobi, Kenya -- a New Way of Doing a Book Launch

By Francis Njuguna (with accompanying photos)

There are many ways of killing a cat, so a universal saying goes. These latest book events fit in in this category as they “replace” a typical book launch. “It involves the creation of a forum whereby the assembled people enjoy a rare chance to listen, share and dialogue on the contents of the book or books being launched,” said Father Joseph Healey, MM a Maryknoll Missionary priest currently based in Nairobi, Kenya and the author of several theological books. This way of doing a book event is in line with conversational theology (*palaver* theology) that is currently being advocated by the Catholic Church in Africa, Healey further explained.

This was effectively demonstrated at two recent book events held at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), Learning Resource Centre, Auditorium Hall, Langata Campus, Nairobi, Kenya on Friday, October 14, 2016 and at Hekima University College, Riara Campus, Nairobi, Kenya on Saturday, October 15, 2016 respectively. These book events highlighted three books:

1. *The Church We Want: African Catholics Looking to Vatican III*, Edited by Father Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, SJ. 272 pages and published by Acton Publishers, a publishing house based in Nairobi, Kenya.
2. *HIV & AIDS in Africa: Christian Reflection, Public Health, Social Transformation*. Edited by Father Jacquineau Azetsop, SJ. 424 pages and published by Orbis Books Publishing House, New York, USA run by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers Missionary Society.
3. *The Joy of Love: Made Simple for Christian Couples, Pastors, Youth and Laity*. Edited by Father Wilfred Sumani, SJ and Father Peter Knox, SJ. 47 pages and published by the Nairobi-based Paulines Publications Africa run by the Daughters of St. Paul Religious Congregation.

On each day about 30 active participants -- priests, sisters, brothers, lay women and laymen – including a number of Catholic theological scholars as well as writers of chapters in the books were involved fully during the talks and conversations. The well-coordinated book events took the shape of keynote speeches by the authors, responses from key people, plenaries with question and answer sessions and Breakout Groups.

The well selected topics included: “HIV and AIDS and the Modern Social Conditions in Africa;” “HIV: Everyone’s Business;” “Small Christian Communities in Africa;” “The New African Christian Spirituality;” “Responding to HIV and AIDS in Africa (Historical Approach);” “HIV and AIDS in the Light of the Word of God;” “The Growing Importance of African Women Theologians;”, “HIV, Religion and Economics;” and “The Joy of Love (Marriage and Family).”

A key to the methodology or process was the afternoon Breakout Groups that modeled African Christian Conversation Theology. Each day two groups of approximately 12 participants each sat in a circle to reflect on key themes in the three books. They used a

group dynamics method/tool to involve everyone in the discussion. When one person finished sharing, he or she called on another person in the group and so on until everyone had shared at least once. This improved the quality (richness) and the focus of the sharing. All “four” groups (covering the two days) has lively and stimulating theological conversation and sharing. Two Minute Reports on “Two Key Points” from the Breakout Groups were given in the Plenary Sessions followed by more African Christian Conversation Theology (palaver). The process worked!

Some highlights: The participants emphasized the importance of the dialog of palaver -- the tireless effort of reaching an inspired consensus. The term “African Church” was preferred over “the Church in Africa” (related to the danger of doing European theology in Africa). African theologians should not answer the questions that people are not asking. The “theology of scratch where it itches” coined by deceased Bishop Patrick Kalilombe was stressed. Father Laurenti Magesa emphasized the need for a rite of passage for both parties in the conversation. The Catholic bishops in African should listen more to the experiences of people on the grassroots. African lay people should speak out more.

A cross section of people interviewed during the two book events hailed this new way of doing a book launch.

1. “I welcome this book event. It seems it has something to offers; hence we should be open to learn from it,” remarked Professor Philomena Njeri Mwaura, a lecturer at Kenyatta University and an author.
2. Dr. Mary Getui, a lecturer at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), also welcomed this new mode of book launching and stressed, “It has all the impetus to bring new ‘life’ to the normal book launch. I welcome it.”
3. Azetsop urged the participants to incorporate the HIV and AIDS pandemic issue in their day-to-day life. “It must concern each one of us. This would be the best and effective way to battle it out. While modern medical science plays its central role in the fight against the pandemic, caregiving and prayers services offered by the Christian Churches are equally central in the battle against this pandemic,” he stressed.
4. Sumani urged the Catholic Church in Africa to ensure that the new book on family and marriage is available to each of the Catholic faithful on the continent. “There is an expressed feeling that this book has not yet gotten the rightful marketing among the Catholic faithful in the African continent. Church pastoral agents must ensure that good distribution and use are carried out,” emphasized Sumani.
5. Magesa stressed the need for the Catholic Church in Africa to always incorporate African values and cultures in the teaching of the Christian message. “It is fair to say that we should always look at the Christian teaching from the African point of view. In this way, the Christian message will be more meaningful to the local faithful while new ways of tackling the challenges facing the Catholic faith in Africa will develop,” he stressed.
6. A Catholic couple spoke at both book events: Dr. Njoroge Mwangi and Lucy Mwangi, members of the Prayer Group at St Paul’s University Chaplaincy in Nairobi.

They talked about the role of the family in Christianity. “This family ministry is quite central in the promotion of our faith in the Catholic Church. The church must make every effort to promote it and we, as parents, must make every effort to bring out a true family in the church and the society in general,” they emphasized.

The book event at Hekima has two stimulating Prayer Services: Opening Prayer and “Meditation on African Christian Conversation Theology.” Closing Prayer Service on “AIDS and African Theology.”

After a lot of healthy *palaver*, participants agreed that the Editor of the *Hekima Review* should store all the documents of the two book events in a special “TCCRSA Follow-up Folder on African Theology” along with the documentation of the other book events on the three continents of Africa, North America and Europe for further use in a print version and electronically. The December, 2016 issue of the *Hekima Review* will have a special “Forum Section” on the two book events in Nairobi.



Dr. Philomena Mwaura (middle) addressing one of the sessions during the book event. On her left is Father Laurent Magesa and on her right is Father Joseph Healey.



Left to right: Father Jacquineau Azetsop, Father Albert Mundele and Sister Theo Katundano.



Left to right: Mrs. Lucy Mwangi, Dr. Njoroge Mwangi and Father Clement Majawa.



Father Jacquineau Azetsop and Father Albert Mundele.

Francis Njuguna
Nairobi, Kenya
Email: osnjuguna@yahoo.com