

Review of the doctoral dissertation

LES ASPECTS CULTURELS DES APPARITIONS MARIALES À KIBEHO

(1981 – 1989). UNE APPROCHE MISSIOLOGIQUE

written by

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The review contains two sections. In the first section, the doctoral dissertation will be assessed from the perspective of its methodology. In the second section, the content of the dissertation and its contribution to the theological reflection of Catholic theology and missiology will be assessed. The whole ends with the Conclusion and some questions for the further discussion.

1. Evaluation from the point of view of method

The work has a very clear structure. It consists of two main parts preceded by a “General Introduction” and concluded by a “General Conclusion”. The “General Introduction” covers all the main points that a good doctoral thesis should have: statement of the problem, objective of the research, research questions, originality and importance of the research, research methodology, indication of the most consulted sources, the structure of the thesis.

The division of the doctoral dissertation into two main parts corresponds to the research problem announced in the Introduction and contained the title of the doctoral dissertation. The title specifies two important research problems concerning Marian apparitions in Kibeho (1981-1989). The first refers to the cultural aspects of the apparitions, and the second to the missiological and theological issues.

The division into two parts is related to the four main research questions that are addressed in the dissertation. The research questions of Part I are as follows: What are the significant Rwandan cultural aspects that are manifested in the Marian apparitions of Kibeho, and how do they influence the way these apparitions are perceived and interpreted? What impact have the Marian apparitions of Kibeho had on various Rwandan cultural aspects? The research questions of the Part II are as follows: From an inculturation and missiological perspective, how do the Marian apparitions of Kibeho integrate Rwandan cultural values and practices, and how do they promote the dialogue between Christianity and traditional religion? What is the theological and cultural message conveyed by the Marian apparitions of Kibeho, and how did this message meet the cultural and spiritual needs of the Rwandan population between 1981 and 1989?

The doctoral dissertation consists of seven well-structured and logically arranged chapters. Part I contains 4 chapters, Part II contains 3 chapters. The ratio of pages in part I to pages in part II is 242:101. This ratio shows that part I is much more extensive than part II. The use of such proportions in a doctoral thesis in theology may raise questions. The answer to this question is given in the “General Introduction”, where it is noted that the scientific work carried out so far on the Marian apparitions in Kibeho (1981-1989) has mainly dealt with the question

of the authenticity of these apparitions and focused on their theological and dogmatic aspects. However, they neglected the cultural and sociological dimensions of these events. As Fr. Ukurikiyimefura notices, "This study thus seeks to fill this gap by adopting a missiological approach that takes into account the cultural and sociological realities of Rwanda, in order to better understand how the message of Kibeho dialogues with local traditions, values and beliefs" (p. 18). This perspective is confirmed on page 17: "These apparitions took place in a specific African context, allowing for an exploration of the interaction between local religious traditions and imported Catholicism. For this reason, these apparitions cannot be fully understood without taking into account the cultural and religious context in which they occurred." This justification fully explains why the work is structured in this way and why Part I of the dissertation is much more extensive than Part II.

The fact that this dissertation is a theological work, with a particular emphasis on missiology, is justified by the entire Part II, by the pastoral and missionary reflections in the second part of each of the first four chapters, as well as by the explanations contained in the "General Introduction", where the theological dimension of Marian apparitions in the history of the Church are presented and the prophetic dimension of the Marian apparitions in Kibeho (1981-1989) is indicated. The author of the dissertation states: "The apparitions of Kibeho were accompanied by powerful messages focused on conversion, prayer and penance, and carried warnings about the dangers of hatred and divisions. A notable aspect of these apparitions is their prophetic content, with messages of warning about future tragedies later interpreted as predictions of the 1994 Rwandan genocide" (p. 17).

Assessing the dissertation from a methodological point of view, one can say that both the structure of the two parts as well as the structure of the individual chapters is well-constructed. Each part begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion. Similarly, each of the seven chapters begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion. In this way, the work gains clarity of discourse and argumentation.

The language of the dissertation is clear and academic. The author skillfully uses paraphrases and quotations. He analyzes and synthesizes texts. The footnotes are carefully done.

The bibliography is very extensive (26 pages) and is divided into primary and secondary sources. Two things are worth noting here. First, while the bibliography lists several hundred items that author has certainly consulted, in the General Introduction the most consulted sources are indicated. Second, in section I. "Les sources principales", various categories of sources are indicated, including: Sources on Marian apparitions; Sources on culture; Historical and contextual sources. This division is very helpful.

2. Evaluation of the dissertation's content and its contribution to the theological reflection of Catholic theology and missiology

The good thing about this thesis is that it encourages thinking, reflection and asking questions.

Part I is dedicated to Rwandan cultural aspects and their influence on the reception and interpretation of Marian apparitions in Kibeho. Based on UNESCO documents and the works of several prominent sociologists, the author of the dissertation begins by giving a definition of culture. This is important because the concept of "culture" is central in Part I of the dissertation and the concept of "inculturation" is central in Part II. Fr. Ukurikiyimefura defines culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features

that characterize a society or social group. It encompasses, in addition to the arts and literature, ways of life, fundamental human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs. Rwanda, with its rich cultural heritage, is no exception. Rwanda is a society where community values, family structure, language and social practices play a fundamental role in the communication and perception of mystical events” (p. 27).

Therefore, in **Part I** of the dissertation elements of Rwandan culture such as language, social practices, family structure and artistic expression are analyzed and interpreted. The aim is to show that they have shaped the reception and interpretation of Marian apparitions in Kibeho.

In my review of Part I of the dissertation, I will focus specifically on **Chapter I**, which analyzes the language (verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal) of Our Lady's communication. The author notes that, similarly to the Marian apparitions in Guadalupe in Mexico, Lourdes in France, Fatima in Portugal and Gietrzwałd in Poland, addressing the three authentic visionaries of Kibeho (Mumureke Alphomsine, Mukamazimpaka Nathalie, and Mukangango Marie Claire) Mary spoke in their native language, *Kinyarwanda*.

Fr. Ukurikiyimefura analyzes the grammatical structure of the Kinyarwanda language and some Rwandan expressions pronounced by the Virgin Mary in Kibeho, as well as the influence of verbal language on the reception and interpretation of the Marian apparitions of Kibeho. The analyses are very thorough, to state: firstly, that “the language used during the Kibeho apparitions is the Rwandan language Kinyarwanda” (p. 41); secondly, that “the messages of Kibeho, transmitted in the language of the people, reinforced the feeling of a closeness between the divine and Rwandan believers and played a key role in the way the Marian apparitions of Kibeho were understood, accepted and interpreted by the Rwandan population” (p. 43).

Fr. Ukurikiyimefura also analyzes Mary's paraverbal language during her apparitions. He states, for example, that the tone of her voice in Kibeho is that of a Rwandan mother. However, what seems more important is the religious conclusion he draws, namely: the calm and tone of voice that characterized Mary during her apparitions in Kibeho “can be perceived as a call for peace, reconciliation and harmony. A gentle tone encourages attentive listening and willing obedience. Rwandans are invited to actively listen to the messages of peace, reconciliation and love, not only in the spiritual context but also in their daily interactions” (p. 45).

In a similar vein, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura interprets Mary's smile and her tears, as testified by the visionaries. The analysis of non-verbal language leads him to some pastoral conclusions. For example, he writes: “The interpretation of the Virgin Mary's smile during the Kibeho apparitions can be multiple and rich in meaning, particularly when linked to Rwandan culture. In Rwandan culture, a smile is often interpreted as a gesture of comfort and hope, capable of appease hearts and giving courage to people facing difficult challenges or trials. The smile of the Virgin Mary could be perceived as a message of divine comfort, indicating that even in the midst of trials, there is hope and a loving presence that guides and sustains” (p. 48). Or, “Mary's tears in Kibeho also challenge us to look closely at the tears of those who suffer on this earth and have no one to comfort them. When we meet someone who is crying, we must stop and comfort them” (p. 51-52).

Mary's appearance, her clothing and her movements are also analyzed. It is emphasized that Mary's skin “was neither white, nor black, nor mixed race, but seemed to transcend these

distinctions.” Once again, the interpretation given by Fr. Ukurikiyimefura has a pastoral and missionary dimension in the Rwandan context of multiethnicity. He writes: “With this phenomenon of color neither white nor black, Mother of the Word wants to enlighten us on how to overcome the problems of discrimination encountered in our world today, especially in Rwanda” (p. 58). “This could encourage Rwandans to adopt an inclusive vision and value unity in diversity. In the Rwandan ethnic context, Marie's color could serve as a poignant reminder of unity beyond ethnic divisions. This could encourage reconciliation and peace between different communities. Marie's skin color could also symbolize diversity within humanity, emphasizing that all individuals are equal before God, regardless of their physical appearance” (p. 59).

The conclusion of Chapter I has a similar theological, pastoral and missionary resonance: “By choosing to communicate holistically (verbally, para-verbally and non-verbally), Marie addresses a wider range of people, using different channels so that her message is understood and deeply felt” (p. 113).

The analyses undertaken in the following **chapters of Part I** are carried out in a similar way. In the first part of each of these chapters, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura writes about how a given element present in the Marian apparitions in Kibeho is understood in Rwandan culture, and then, in the second part of the chapter, he shows, first, how this element, in terms of Rwandan culture, manifests itself in the Marian apparitions in Kibeho; secondly, what is the impact of this element on the reception and interpretation of the apparitions in Kibeho; thirdly, how to interpret this element from a pastoral and missionary perspective. The elements analyzed and interpreted in these chapters are: in chapter II - greetings and farewells; in chapter III - the family and its functions; in chapter IV - Rwandan works of art.

In the conclusion of **Chapter II**, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura makes two important points. First, he emphasizes that “In Rwandan culture, greetings and farewells play a crucial role in maintaining community ties. The visionaries, by greeting the Virgin Mary and thanking her at the end of the apparitions, set an example of respectful and harmonious community behavior. This strengthened the sense of community among the witnesses and participants, fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and shared faith. Greetings and farewells in Rwandan culture are often accompanied by gestures and facial expressions that convey emotions. The visionaries used these same techniques to express emotions such as joy, sadness, or the urgency of the Virgin's messages. This helped the witnesses to grasp not only the words but also the deep feelings associated with the apparitions” (p. 153-154). Secondly, it shows the pastoral and missionary dimension of these greetings and farewells, emphasizing the necessity of inculturation of the Christian message, as exemplified by the Marian apparitions of Kibeho. He states: “The greetings and farewells in the Marian apparitions of Kibeho show how much these cultural elements influenced the way the population perceived and integrated the messages of the Virgin Mary” (p. 157).

In **Chapter III**, the Marian apparitions in Kibeho and their reception and pastoral-missionary significance are considered in the context of the Rwandan understanding of the family and its function in society. The hierarchical relationships and specific duties of Rwandan family members are discussed. The classification of family members and the terminology in Kinyarwanda such as *umwana* (child), *umugore* (woman), *nyina* (mother) and *umubyeyi* (parent/mother) are also described. As Fr. Ukurikiyimefura notes, “by addressing the visionaries of Kibeho using these terms, Mary was able to anchor her message in familiar concepts, thus enabling a strong cultural connection with local believers. These

terms, which carry emotional and spiritual values, probably influenced the way Marian messages were perceived, reinforcing the idea of a close and understanding Virgin, embedded in the Rwandan cultural fabric” (p. 210).

In this chapter, the term “*Nyina wa Jambo*” (“Mother of the Word”) is explained for the first time in the dissertation. The Virgin Mary herself used this term to describe herself: *Ndi Nyina wa Jambo/Umubyeyi w'Imana!* In explaining this term, which is very important for the Marian apparitions in Kibeho, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura writes: “The word ‘*Nyina wa Jambo*’, that is to say ‘Mother of the Word’, is synonymous with ‘*Umubyeyi w'Imana*’, that is to say ‘Mother of God’ as Mary herself explained” (p. 206). Since the term “Mother of the Word” appears much earlier in the dissertation (especially in chapter II, points 2.3.2.1; 2.3.2.2; 2.3.2.3;) in my opinion, an explanation of where it comes from should be given much earlier in the course of the dissertation. The explanation of the meaning of this term in the context of Rwandan culture is given. Twice in the dissertation, there is a statement: “The expression Mother of the Word was a self-presentation deliberately chosen by the Virgin Mary to adapt to Rwandan culture, according to which speech, *ijambo*, is of primary importance in social life in Rwanda. This title has implications in Rwandan culture that allow us to grasp its depth, in an inculturated way” (p. 206 and p. 288). Quoting another African theologian, E. Sinayoboye, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura repeats once again that “the title ‘Mother of the Word’ fits perfectly with the African culture to which Rwanda belongs” (p. 290). The author also quotes Andrzej Jakacki, a Polish Pallotine working in Rwanda, who says the same thing in his book *Apparitions de la « Mère du Verbe » à Kibeho, (Rwanda, 28.11.1981-28.11.1989)* [Pallotti-Presse, Kigali 2013]. I was not convinced of this while reading the dissertation. The most convincing argument in this regard is given on page 294, where Fr. Ukurikiyimefura quotes the explanation of one of the visionaries, Alphonsine MUMUREKE. He writes:

“By saying, ‘I am the Mother of the Word,’ Mumureke explains to us, ‘it is as if Mother of the Word was speaking more specifically to Rwandans, because the word is of great importance there. It is as if she were saying to them: This word that you respect in your culture, this word that guides and directs your life because you have kept it, I come to remind you that there is another word, the Word of God, your Creator who became man to dwell among you: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1:14). This Word became flesh in my womb by the Holy Spirit. I am the Mother of this Word, the Word of God, through whom all things were created (Jn 1:1). If the word of men governs your life because you have faithfully kept it, why not welcome this Word, this Word, which says: *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (Jn 14:6). [...] If you let yourself be guided by this Word, you live in truth” (p. 294).

On the relationship between Rwandan culture and Marian apparitions Fr.

Ukurikiyimefura also writes in **Chapter IV**, showing the influence of traditional Rwandan art on the reception and interpretation of Marian apparitions in Kibeho. Among other things, traditional Rwandan songs and dances are described, before moving on to the interpretation of the songs and dances related to the apparitions in Kibeho. Mary taught the children prayers, which later became religious songs. Fr. Ukurikiyimefura quotes some of these songs and analyzes their content from a religious, social, cultural and political perspective. He notes that “The songs learned by Alphonsine Mumureke and Nathalie Mukamazimpaka in Kibeho carry deep meanings, both spiritually and socio-culturally, and reflect key elements of the Catholic faith while being rooted in Rwandan culture” (p. 219). He also states: “Traditional songs and dances played a key role in the reception and interpretation of the Marian apparitions of

Kibeho by making the Marian message more accessible, reinforcing collective emotion and promoting its dissemination in Rwandan culture” (p. 226). Elsewhere, he notes: “Whether through the chapel, holy water or sacred objects, each material element contributes to deepening the relationship of believers with the messages of Kibeho, by integrating landmarks specific to their culture” (p. 248).

Part II of the dissertation analyzes the Marian apparitions in Kibeho from a missiological perspective. The definition of the term “missiology” as distinct from the term “inculturation” is given at the beginning of Chapter VI. I think it would be better if these terms and their relationship to each other were presented in the Introduction to Part II. In three consecutive chapters, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura examines the influence of Marian apparitions on the evangelizing mission of the Church in Rwanda and their interaction with the local culture.

In **Chapter V**, the influence of the Marian apparitions in Kibeho on the language, culture, social, religious, economic and political life of Rwanda is analyzed in depth. Once again, the author emphasizes how the Marian apparitions contributed to the revalorization of the national language *Kinyarwanda*, which had been replaced by French during the colonial period and was reintroduced in 1978 as the language of instruction at all levels of education. The rest of this chapter describes the impact of Marian apparitions: on the family and moral life in Rwandan families; on culture and tradition, as these apparitions have become an important element of the local culture; on art and music, and above all on religious education with a strong emphasis on healthy Marian devotion. The idea of inculturation is present in all these points. I appreciated a quote from a local bishop, Augustin Misago, who in his homily, referring to the teachings of the Council of Trent, reminded the faithful how Catholics should relate to the figures of Christ, Mary and the saints, so that it does not turn into pagan idolatry (quote on p. 272; unfortunately, the date on which the sermon was delivered is not given).

This chapter also discusses the impact of the Marian apparitions in Kibeho on social life in an ethnically diverse country, with an emphasis on values such as peace and reconciliation. The author writes: “Regarding peace awareness and reconciliation, Kibeho’s messages, centered on peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness, helped raise awareness among Rwandans of these values, even as ethnic tensions continued to grow. (...) As for political instrumentalization, the prophetic messages of the apparitions, which included warnings about future conflicts and suffering, were sometimes used by different groups to justify or criticize current policies. The growing ethnic tensions in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to an atmosphere where religious visions could be interpreted opportunistically” (p. 300). A similar opinion is presented in the General Introduction, where Fr. Ukurikiyimefura writes about the prophetic content of the Marian apparitions in Kibeho “with warning messages about future tragedies, which were later interpreted as prophecies of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda” (p. 17). This issue is also addressed in Chapter VII.

In **Chapter VI**, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura states that “The Marian apparitions of Kibeho (1981 and 1989) represent a significant example of the inculturation of Christianity in Africa. (...) Kibeho (...) thus becomes a true field of inculturation where Christianity and African culture, especially Rwandan culture, enrich each other.” (p. 311). A few pages earlier, the author states that the message contained in the Marian apparitions in Kibeho “took place in a specific context, that of the spiritual, social and cultural challenges of Rwanda and the Great Lakes region” (p. 304-305). These words raise the question: To what extent do the Marian apparitions in Kibeho encourage the local churches in the Great Lakes region to promote a commitment to dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation in the region? The question concerns

the influence of religion on social and political life in the region. I appreciate that Fr. Ukurikiyimefura raised this issue, although a deeper analysis would be welcomed. This central topic of forgiveness and reconciliation in the context of the 1994 genocide is underlined in Chapter VI, Section 6.5.2.2. entitled: "Inculturation of the theological themes of peace, reconciliation and repentance." The sub-section has only two paragraphs. I will quote the entire second paragraph, because I think this topic is very important for further theological, pastoral, social, cultural and political reflection.

"The central message of the Kibeho apparitions was the call for peace, repentance and reconciliation. These themes directly echoed the social and cultural realities of a country like Rwanda, which was marked by growing ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis in the 1980s. Mary's warnings about the coming violence, which proved prophetic during the 1994 genocide, responded to crucial local issues and appealed to traditional Rwandan values of solidarity and community unity, showing that the Christian faith could meet the needs for reconciliation and harmony in society" (p. 317).

This topic is so central that it is also addressed in **chapter VII**. This chapter consists of two main parts. The first part shows the theological meaning of the Marian apparitions in Kibeho, while the second part describes the cultural message of these apparitions. When writing about the theological meaning of the apparitions, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura once again points to their prophetic character in the context of the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994. He notes that in the apparitions of August 15, 1982, the visionaries saw Mary in tears. "In front of more than ten thousand people, the three visionaries Alphonsine, Nathalie and Marie-Claire suddenly had frightening visions: the girls began to cry, clench their teeth and tremble. The Virgin, they say, shows them 'decapitated heads', 'a river of blood', 'people killing each other', corpses abandoned without anyone coming to bury them." (p. 341). In this context, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura writes: "The prophecy concerning the massacres prepared Rwandan Christians not to despair because of the genocide, but to seize these circumstances as a call for purification and true conversion" (p. 341). This topic, although mentioned, is not developed further in the dissertation. On page 342, the author quotes a very interesting statement given by the bishop of Gikongoro, which is worth quoting in its entirety:

"Just by taking a retrospective look at the statements made by certain visionaries in Kibeho, or the typical behavior they exhibited at certain times, one cannot help but think at first glance that the great misfortunes that have befallen Rwanda and even neighboring countries in the last decade seem to have been predicted in Kibeho during the apparitions, in one way or another. The same is true of the tragedies experienced by our Church in recent years, especially in 1994 and afterwards" (p. 342).

On the last pages of the dissertation, pointing to the prospects for further possible scientific research related to the Marian apparitions in Kibeho, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura notes that, among other things, this research could address the question how the Church in Rwanda conveys the prophetic message from Kibeho to her faithful after the genocide in 1994. In my opinion, Fr. Ukurikiyimefura himself could undertake this task, because the issue of political and ethnic tensions that existed in Rwanda in the 1980s is repeatedly raised in his entire dissertation. As Fr. Ukurikiyimefura writes, nobody could have imagined that the prophetic visions of the girls could have warned against something as terrible as the genocide committed in 1994. It is a sad constatation that makes even more urgent and necessary the elaboration of the pastoral program for the Church in Rwanda and for the local churches in the region of Great Lakes,

which would call on the Catholic faithful not only to deepen their personal Marian devotion, but also to a social commitment in the sense of mutual reconciliation and cooperation, in the spirit to the Council's definition of the Church as sacrament. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, it reads: "the Church is in Christ like 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" (LG 1). The Church fulfils her role as sacrament not only by leading the people to the unity with God but also by contributing to the unicity of the whole human race.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the importance of the topic, good methodology, solidity of the academic work, and its pioneering and inspirational character, I consider the dissertation of Fr. Walter Ukurikiyimefura, entitled:

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as a very good and valuable research work worthy of being presented to the Council of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Stefan Kardynał Wyszyński as a doctoral dissertation.

Therefore, I recommend **Fr. Walter Ukurikiyimefura** to be admitted to the further stages of doctoral procedures.

Questions for discussion:

In explaining the phenomenon of the skin color of the Mother of the Word in the Kibeho apparitions, which is neither white nor black, it is said that in the Rwandan ethnic context, the color of Mary could serve as a poignant reminder of unity beyond ethnic divisions. Have there been any initiatives taken by the Church of Rwanda in this direction?

What is the pastoral and social impact of the Marian apparitions of Kibeho on the local Churches of the Great Lakes region? In other words, has the message of forgiveness and reconciliation present in these apparitions encouraged the local Churches of the region to promote ethnic reconciliation?

On page 347 of the dissertation the Author writes about the inculturation of Christian values in local culture and tradition. He states: "Mary's call to a return to traditional cultural values is not only addressed to citizens, the custodians of these values, but also calls on pastoral workers, that is, all those involved in evangelization, to carry out an authentic evangelization that respects local cultures." Can you give some examples of this type of evangelization?

In which sense the title given to Mary as "Mother of the Word" is theologically complementary to the title "Mather of God"?

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