

# **When the body of Christ has AIDS**

## **A Theological Metaphor for Global Solidarity in light of HIV&AIDS**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the global implications of the statement from African theologians that the body of Christ has AIDS. It will outline how these theologians employ the metaphor of the body of Christ to challenge the Western world to enter into solidarity with Africa struck by HIV&AIDS. From the realization that the HIV epidemic is embedded in globalization processes, and from the understanding of contextual theologies as significant to Western theology, it is argued that Western theologians have to take seriously the critical African questions. Hence it is investigated what it means for the Western world to say that the body of Christ has AIDS, and how this metaphor helps to envision global solidarity in light of the HIV epidemic.

### **Keywords**

Body of Christ; Solidarity; HIV and AIDS; Globalization; African theology; Intercultural theology

### **Introduction**

In present-day sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV epidemic is one of the most disruptive social experiences on the continent. It causes bodily, social and spiritual suffering of millions of people and it brings sickness and death. In this context, African theologians state that the body of Christ has AIDS. With this they creatively recapture the classic theological symbol of the body of Christ. This symbol not just refers to the human body of Jesus Christ. According to the Pauline writings in the New Testament and central Christian doctrines it refers to the symbolic body of Christ in the holy Communion, the metaphorical body of Christ being the church, and the eschatological and Trinitarian body of Christ being all humanity and the whole of creation. African theologians employ all these dimensions of the body of Christ in order to call for solidarity in the context of HIV and AIDS. This call is phrased powerfully in the statement that the body of Christ has AIDS. Though this is a very contextual theological statement, its theological meaning transcends the African context and has global implications. As a metaphor for the church, the concept of the body of Christ suggests an interconnectedness of churches and Christians globally. Even further, in its Trinitarian dimension the body of Christ counts for an interrelatedness of humanity and creation. African theologians are aware of the global reach of the metaphor, and hence they call for

global solidarity in the body of Christ in the context of HIV&AIDS. The present article investigates the global implications of the statement that the body of Christ has AIDS. It seeks to explore how the body of Christ indeed is a powerful resource to develop a theology of global solidarity in light of the AIDS crisis in Africa. Doing this, the focus is on the Western world, of which I am part of. What does it mean theologically for people in the Western world to say that the body of Christ has AIDS? The present article deals with this question from the discipline of intercultural theology. From a Western perspective, this discipline seeks to study theological articulations from all over the world, and reflects upon their significance for theology in the Western world. The idea of the body of Christ with AIDS which is explored by African theologians, is such an articulation with a rich potential meaning for Western theology.

In order to investigate this meaning, first it is outlined briefly how the metaphor of the body of Christ is used in African theological responses to HIV and AIDS. Then particular attention is paid to how African theologians from this metaphor raise critical questions to the Western world and call for global solidarity. The third section is a kind of intermezzo, arguing why the questions raised by African theologians are to be taken seriously by Western theologians. After that, in the fourth section it is explored how the metaphor of the body of Christ may help the Western world to envision solidarity in light of the AIDS crisis in Africa.

### **The Body of Christ in African Theological Reflections on HIV&AIDS**

In sub-Saharan Africa, from the 1980s HIV&AIDS has developed into an epidemic with huge proportions. It not only has taken millions of lives and has left numerous children orphaned, but also has contributed to people's suffering through stigma and discrimination. From the late 1990s, but especially after the turn into the new millennium, the social and spiritual crisis caused by HIV&AIDS becomes a central theme in African theology.<sup>1</sup> Phrasing the urgency to reflect theologically on HIV&AIDS, South African theologian Tinyiko Maluleke has called the epidemic a new *kairos*. With this he makes a parallel to the Apartheid in South Africa. Quoting the opening sentences of the *Kairos Document* which addressed Apartheid, Maluleke comments:

The writers of the *Kairos Document* explained *kairos* in terms of "crisis", "moment of truth", "moment of grace and opportunity", and a "dangerous time". All these "definitions" of *kairos* fit the challenge posed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The HIV/AIDS pandemic does seriously present us with a critical and dangerous time, a moment of truth as well as a moment of grace and

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the responses of African theologian to HIV&AIDS, see Martha Frederiks, 'HIV and Aids: Mapping Theological Responses in Africa', *Exchange. Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, 37:1 (2008), 4-23.

opportunity. The AIDS crisis catapults us into a “moment of truth” because it brings us face to face with the failure, sinfulness, frailty and interdependence of human beings.<sup>2</sup>

From the realization that HIV&AIDS is an urgent theological issue, African theologians have started to address social, cultural, religious and pastoral issues raised by the epidemic. These theologians are especially of a younger generation, with a significant number of women theologians.<sup>3</sup> When reading their publications, it is striking that often is referred to the metaphor of the body of Christ. It appears that this concept is used especially to argue for solidarity in the context of the AIDS crisis.

To understand the references to the body of Christ, one has to realize the way churches initially dealt with the epidemic. The stigma and discrimination towards people living with HIV&AIDS in the society often was found in churches as well. From the beginning, in Africa like elsewhere in the world HIV&AIDS was associated with homosexuality and other forms of ‘promiscuous’ sexual behavior. It often was considered as a result of sexual immorality, or even as a curse from God. In churches HIV&AIDS was hardly mentioned but in a stigmatizing and moralizing discourse. This contributed heavily to the suffering of people living with HIV and AIDS. Numerous African theologians have started to challenge this situation, and therefore they employ among others the metaphor of the body of Christ. Take, for example, a 1998 publication of theologian Fulata Moyo. She calls upon churches to engage in the response to the HIV epidemic by saying: ‘If the Church is not just a structure with the symbol of the Cross but the body of the compassionate and holy Christ, then it should take up the AIDS/HIV challenge and make the difference as it brings hope where hope has gone.’<sup>4</sup> This citation points to the Pauline references to the church as the body of Christ, which is applied here as a missiological motive: being the body of Christ, the church has to show people living with HIV and AIDS the compassion, love and healing brought by Jesus Christ. Several other theologians employ the metaphor in a similar way, calling on the church as body of Christ to follow the example of Jesus’ mission towards those who were suffering, sick and marginalized.

The application of the metaphor of the body of Christ as a missiological motive is powerful to call upon churches to engage in a Christian response to people whose lives are infected and affected by HIV&AIDS. However, it may suggest that HIV&AIDS is a reality *outside* the church, to which churches have to respond through mission. In the course of years it became clear that the epidemic also affects and infects people inside the church. Realizing this, the silence of churches became even more poignant. Hence theologians have started to

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<sup>2</sup> Tinyiko Maluleke, 'The Challenge of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa. Towards an HIV/AIDS Sensitive Curriculum', *Missionalia*, 29:2 (2001), 125-143 at 129-130.

<sup>3</sup> From 2002, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has put HIV&AIDS on the top of its agenda. See Isabel Phiri, 'African Women of Faith Speak Out in an HIV/AIDS Era' in I.A. Phiri, B. Haddad and M. Masenya, eds., *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2003), 3-22.

<sup>4</sup> Fulata Moyo, 'The AIDS Crisis: A Challenge to the Integrity of the Church in Malawi' in K. R. Ross, ed., *Faith at the Frontiers of Knowledge* (Blantyre: CLAIM 1998), 94-110 at 102.

break this silence by stating that the church itself has AIDS. In these statements they often refer to the metaphor of the body of Christ:

The Church's experience in Malawi has reached a point where it would not be blasphemous to say that the body of Christ has AIDS.<sup>5</sup>

[T]he church, as the body of Christ, is also infected and affected by the epidemic, for its members suffer and die. The church needs healing.<sup>6</sup>

There are no dividing lines between the Body and some other realities 'out there'. We too are infected. The church today has AIDS.<sup>7</sup>

Why, then, these authors not just state that the church has AIDS but that the body of Christ has AIDS? In my understanding, the metaphor of the body of Christ is used because of its inherent notions of compassion and solidarity. Time and again there is referred to the Pauline comment that if one member of the body of Christ suffers, all members suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26). Phrasing this, several theologians state that when one member of the body of Christ has AIDS, the whole body of Christ is suffering because of AIDS. Especially biblical scholar Musa Dube and South African theologian Denise Ackermann make this a central notion in their *theology of compassion* (Dube) and *feminist theology of praxis* (Ackermann). Exploring the biblical-theological foundations of compassion, Dube mentions:

1 Corinthians 12, which defines the church as a body with many parts, is cited as a key part of the foundation of compassion. If one member suffers, we all suffer with him/her. If one member of the church is infected, the church cannot separate itself. If one member is suffering from AIDS, the church cannot separate from his/her suffering. (...) The church, in other words, should not shy away from saying, "We have AIDS."<sup>8</sup>

Dube's key point is, that people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS cannot be left in their fate, as this would be an affront to the body of Christ. Because in this body all members suffer together, according to Dube compassion and solidarity should be central to the identity of the Christian church. Hence she calls upon churches to break the silence and to declare compassion by identifying as church living with HIV and AIDS.

Just like Dube, also Ackermann denounces the silence of churches on the epidemic and their stigmatizing and discriminating attitudes towards people living with HIV&AIDS. Against this background Ackermann calls churches to engage in a Body-of-Christ praxis, in

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<sup>5</sup> Dixie Banda and Fulata Moyo, 'The Role of the Church in Combating HIV/AIDS in Malawi: Challenges and Prospects', *Journal of Constructive Theology*, 7:1 (2001), 45-62 at 60.

<sup>6</sup> Musa Dube, 'HIV and AIDS Curriculum for Theological Institutions in Africa' in I. A. Phiri, B. Haddad and M. Masenya, eds., *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2003), 209-239 at 214.

<sup>7</sup> Denise Ackermann, 'Tamar's Cry: Re-Reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV and AIDS Pandemic' in M. W. Dube and M. R. A. Kanyoro, eds, *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2004), 27-59 at 31.

<sup>8</sup> Musa Dube, *A Theology of Compassion in the HIV&AIDS Era. Module 7 of the HIV&AIDS Curriculum for TEE Programmes and Institutions in Africa* (Geneva: WCC Publications 2007), 76.

which stigma and discrimination are substituted by mutual care and compassion.<sup>9</sup> She clearly states that when churches continue to be reticent in this area, the essence of the church as body of Christ is seriously threatened:

We diminish the true nature of the church as the Body of Christ when stigma, shame, and judgement characterize our reactions and our relationships with one another. ...When mutual care and trust among members of the Body of Christ are destroyed by the desire to judge and shame, the functioning of the Body is undermined. ... The Body of Christ is in grave danger when it does not affirm the value and the role of every single one of its limbs, no matter their HIV status or any other affliction.<sup>10</sup>

This citation indicates that it is not a self-evidence or an automatism for a church to be the body of Christ. Being part of the body of Christ may be the essence of the church, but this is threatened when the church does not live up to this nature. Ackermann's concern is that this may be happening with African churches in the HIV crisis. A similar concern is expressed by theologian Emmanuel Katongole, who says that the church time and again is to be reconstituted as the body of Christ.<sup>11</sup> In Ackermann's account, the Eucharist is mentioned as a place where this reconstitution may occur. She presents the Eucharistic body of Christ as the embodiment of Christ's solidarity with people infected and affected by HIV&AIDS. She continues with outlining that this Eucharistic solidarity is fundamental to the Eucharistic community and is constitutive to the church as the body of Christ:

At the communion table we are offered the consummate step in forging an ethic of right relationships, across all our differences. "We who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread." This visible, unifying, bodily practice of relationships with all its potential for healing is ours. For the Eucharist to have meaning in our lives, we need to feel its powerful pull to the radical activity of loving relationships with those who are different. (...) A covenanted Eucharistic community is a community in relationship with one another and with God. Paul describes us as the Body of Christ, a body that though it has many members, is one body. (...) The picture here is one of solidarity in suffering, of mutual support and of a moral community in relation with one another and with God, practicing an embodied ethic of resistance and affirmation. Just imagine what that could mean in the midst of an HIV/AIDS pandemic!<sup>12</sup>

From Ackermann's account it appears that the ecclesial and Eucharistic dimensions of the metaphor of the body of Christ are closely related with each other. Both are operated to

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<sup>9</sup> Denise Ackermann, 'From Mere Existence to Tenacious Endurance. Stigma, HIV/AIDS and a Feminist Theology of Praxis' in I. A. Phiri and S. Nadar, eds, *African Women, Religion, and Health. Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books 2006), 221-242 at 235ff.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, 'AIDS in Africa, the Church, and the Politics of Interruption' in F. X. D'Sa and J. Lohmayer, eds, *Heil und Befreiung in Afrika. Die Kirchen vor der Missionarischen Herausforderung durch HIV/AIDS* (Wurzburg: Echter 2007), 167-183 at 177.

<sup>12</sup> Denise Ackermann, 'Deep in the Flesh. Women, Bodies and HIV/AIDS: A Feminist Ethical Perspective' in T. M. Hinga, A.N. Kubai, P. Mwaura and H. Ayanga, eds, *Women, Religion and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Responding to Ethical and Theological Challenges* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2008), 105-125 at 122.

challenge churches to be in solidarity with those infected and affected by the crisis of HIV&AIDS.

To conclude this section, in African theological responses to the *kairos* of the HIV epidemic, the metaphor of the body of Christ has become central because it is a powerful theological resource to denounce the silence and the stigma surrounding HIV&AIDS in churches. By stating that the body of Christ has AIDS, churches are compelled to realise that AIDS is in their midst, and that indeed they are infected and affected themselves. Although African theologians are not the first in stating that the body of Christ has AIDS – this statement appeared in the United States already in the late 1980s<sup>13</sup> –, they have explored this metaphor theologically in a creative and powerful way.

### Critical African Questions to the Western World

When employing the metaphor of the body of Christ, some African theologians do not limit their reflections to churches in Africa. From the statement that the body of Christ has AIDS, they raise critical questions to churches and Christians worldwide. This is informed by their understanding of the body of Christ as referring not just to local churches and faith communities, but also to the world church. This is phrased briefly by Tinyiko Maluleke, who mentions HIV&AIDS to be a *kairos* for churches globally: [I]t is a *kairos* for and of the church – the local church as well as the worldwide church. While we in the church may *not* all be *infected*, we all *can* be infected and once one member of the body is infected we are certainly all *affected*!<sup>14</sup> In a similar way Musa Dube, referring to the compassion in the body of Christ, points out that HIV&AIDS ‘is not only the pain of the African church, but the pain of the worldwide church.’<sup>15</sup> It appears that African theologians, drawing from the metaphor of the body of Christ, declare the church globally to be HIV positive and to experience the pain caused by AIDS. What, then, does this mean? How churches globally, and especially in the Western world, are challenged and questioned from this metaphor?

Again, it is solidarity that is mentioned as crucial within the global body of Christ with AIDS. In the citations above, Maluleke says that when one part of the body of Christ is infected – the African part – then all other parts are infected or at least are affected by AIDS. HIV is a *kairos*, a moment of truth for the body as a whole. Likewise Dube points to a pain that is shared within the entire body of Christ. Both scholars indicate a solidarity in which other churches share the devastating experience of African churches confronted with the crisis caused by HIV and AIDS. Denise Ackermann explores this by operating the classical markers of the church according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Here, the church is confessed to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Wondering what this confession means in the midst of the AIDS crisis she says:

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<sup>13</sup> See Ron Russell-Coons, ‘We have AIDS’ in L.M. Russell, ed., *The Church with AIDS. Renewal in the Midst of a Crisis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press 1990), 35-45 at 45.

<sup>14</sup> Maluleke, ‘The Challenge of HIV/AIDS for Theological Education in Africa’, 125.

<sup>15</sup> Musa Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible. Selected Essays* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press 2008), 123.

If we are truly *one*, we are the church with HIV and AIDS. People living with HIV and AIDS are found in every sector of society and every church denomination. We are all related; what affects one member of the Body of Christ affects us all (1 Cor. 12:26). We are all living with HIV and AIDS. There is no 'us' and 'them'. We dare not forget that inclusion, not exclusion is the way of grace. If we are *holy*, we are not living some superhuman mode of existence. (...) Holiness is not withdrawal from the smell of crisis, but engagement, often risky, in situations where God is present. If we are *catholic*, we are in solidarity because we are connected, in communion, with those who are suffering and who experience fear of rejection, poverty and death. If we are *apostolic*, we stand in continuity with the church in its infancy (...) and we continuously examine the ideals of the early church and measure ourselves against them. (...) Clearly we all fall short in this regard. The marks of the church do, however, offer solid, practical guidelines for measuring our actions as members of this one universal Body, a Body infected with viruses struggling to live faithfully.<sup>16</sup>

From the last sentence it appears clearly that Ackermann considers the body of Christ with AIDS to be the universal church. In her account, the classical markers of the church remember the several parts of the body of Christ to be related with each other, to be in solidarity in suffering, to engage in a joint response towards situations of crisis such as HIV&AIDS, and to live in the spirit of the early Christian community 'where the believers were together and had everything in common' (Book of Acts 2:44). A strong appeal is done here on churches in the West, which are not disrupted by HIV&AIDS in the way African churches are disrupted, but yet are imagined to be affected and even infected by the deadly virus.

What does it mean, then, for Western churches to be affected and infected by HIV? Here, a publication of Emmanuel Katongole is significant. Referring to the statement that the body of Christ has AIDS, Katongole critically raises the question how Western churches relate to this. He mentions that churches in the West tend to view HIV&AIDS as an African problem, and therefore remain silent about it. When they respond to the epidemic at all, they behave like an NGO and come with programs, recommendations and strategies to fight AIDS together with partner organisations and churches in Africa. Hence Katongole evaluates: 'Metaphorically, one can say that Western churches are yet to be infected by HIV/AIDS.'<sup>17</sup> This comment indicates that in his view churches in the West are not yet, but should be infected by HIV&AIDS. How does he imagine this? Katongole in his article employs interruption as a central concept to capture the theological impact of the AIDS crisis. In his view this crisis is to interrupt the church because it raises so many unanswered questions about sex and community, life and healing, and God. Finally, AIDS calls the church itself in question because it challenges the essence of the church as a sign of God's salvation. According to Katongole, not only African churches are to be interrupted by the epidemic in this way, but also Western churches who are part of the same body of Christ. In his view the AIDS crisis should lead Western Christians, firstly, in the realisation that they have grown accustomed to the diseased social reality most Africans live in, and secondly,

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<sup>16</sup> Ackermann, 'Tamar's Cry', in Dube and Kanyoro, eds, *Grant me Justice*, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Katongole, 'AIDS in Africa', in D'Sa and Lohmayer, *Heil und Befreiung in Afrika*, 175.

that they are powerless to change the diseased history of the continent. Only through the interruption of this realisation,

the church becomes de-centred and dis-empowered in order to be reconstituted as the Body of Christ in the world (...) The claim that I am making is not simply that HIV/AIDS is a radical interruption for the church. I want to make the stronger claim that it is only by being so radically interrupted that the church can offer any hope of healing – which is to say, interruption – to the social history of Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, from Katongole's critical account it becomes clear that solidarity in the global body of Christ with AIDS cannot be expressed just by giving financial support and material aid from the West to churches in Africa. Then, the church behaves like an NGO and this is far too limited from an ecclesiological understanding of the universal church as the body of Christ. It appears that for Katongole Western churches have to face the harsh reality of AIDS in Africa and the challenging theological questions it raises, have to admit their powerlessness to change this situation and their inability to provide answers, and exactly through this process of interruption they are in solidarity with African churches and show to be part of the body of Christ with AIDS. This may be seen as a minimum option, but in his opinion it is only through this way that the church can become a sign of God's salvation in the world.

Where Katongole explores the theological challenge of AIDS to Western churches, Musa Dube raises critical questions to the West concerning the global economic and political structures that enable the HIV virus to become such a huge pandemic exactly on the poorest continent of the world. These questions arise from Dube's understanding of the epidemic as a social justice issue, which means that AIDS is not primarily about individual sexual morality, but about the morality of the social institutions and structures in the world.<sup>19</sup> From this understanding Dube denounces all kind of power relations that cause, for example, that women are more prone to get HIV infected than men, and that Africans are far more likely to die when being HIV positive than people living with the virus in Europe or North America. Hence, Dube – who is a biblical scholar – employs gender critical and postcolonial hermeneutics to read the Bible for justice and healing in the context of the global HIV pandemic. See, for instance, her reading of Mark 5:21-43, where Jesus rises the little daughter of Jairus from death. This is applied by Dube on the HIV epidemic as follows:

While international exploitation has brought people to live too close to death, to live in sickness and stigmatization, Jesus brings them into a new family, where the exploited and oppressed are welcomed as daughters, rather than being stigmatized and excluded for their bleeding/colonized condition. (...) Jesus, therefore, makes a big difference by defying the death-dealing forces of both colonial and patriarchal oppression that attack the physical, spiritual and social body. He calls a

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<sup>18</sup> Katongole, 'AIDS in Africa', in D'Sa and Lohmayer, *Heil und Befreiung in Afrika*, 177.

<sup>19</sup> Musa Dube, 'Grant Me Justice: Towards Gender-Sensitive Multi-Sectoral HIV/AIDS Readings of the Bible' in M. W. Dube and M. R. A. Kanyoro, eds, *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2004), 3-26 at 4-5.



dead little girl to life and she rises and starts walking about! This is liberation – liberation that breaks the bonds of patriarchal and colonizing international relations.<sup>20</sup>

In this quote and at many other places, Dube mentions critically international relations as colonizing Africa and fostering and prolonging the HIV&AIDS epidemic. Although she does not link this with the metaphor of the body of Christ directly, it was noted above that she considers AIDS to be a pain for all churches in the global body of Christ, and hence the question arises for the power relationships within the body of Christ. The suggestion that the Western world maintains a structure of unequal economic and political international relationships which facilitate HIV to spread easily in Africa, cannot be ignored by Western churches when they realize to be part of the universal body of Christ with AIDS. Thus, next to the theological questions mentioned by Katongole, the metaphor of the body of Christ imposes also questions about international relations to churches in the Western part of the world. When exploring the global implications of the statement that the body of Christ has AIDS, African theologians point to different dimensions and issues, but essentially they raise only one question: the question for global solidarity within the body of Christ with AIDS.

### **Why Taking Seriously the African Question for Solidarity in the Body of Christ?**

Clearly, it is somewhat difficult to expect Western churches to identify as body of Christ with AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa the AIDS crisis is a devastating reality which evidently is a *kairos* to churches and theology. In the Western world the situation is very different. Indeed, HIV&AIDS occurs there as well, but only at a small scale and relatively under control. This explains why the epidemic has not been an urgent issue for Western theology up to now. Yet, in my opinion the challenges raised by African theologians cannot be ignored but ask for further theological reflection. Why? There are two major reasons for this. The first concerns the process of globalization, in which the HIV epidemic is embedded, and which calls for a recognition of the value of solidarity. The second points to the insight of intercultural theology, that contextual theologies such as African theology responding to AIDS, are to be taken seriously in the theological debates in our globalizing world.

The process of globalization leads to an increasing interconnectedness of the economic, political, social and cultural life of people living in the world. There is a growing awareness for the ambiguous results of this process. Globalization brings progress and opportunities for societies and people all over the world, but also challenges, difficulties and all kind of problems. The main concern is that globalization contributes to the inequalities of the world. As liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez phrases it:

To be against globalization as such is like being against electricity. However, this cannot lead us to resign ourselves to the present order of things because globalization as it is now being carried out

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<sup>20</sup> Dube, *The HIV & AIDS Bible*, 95.

exacerbates the unjust inequalities among different sectors of humanity and the social, economic, political, and cultural exclusion of a good portion of the world's population.<sup>21</sup>

The link between globalization and growing inequalities is explained by theologian Daniel Groody, when he points out that globalization has given us new technology such as global positioning systems, but 'has made us less able to find the ethical coordinates and the spiritual vision that would help us find a place of human solidarity.'<sup>22</sup> From this observation Groody, like other scholars, emphasises the importance of solidarity as a fundamental value in the process of globalization. Following John Paul II the call is for a 'globalization of solidarity'<sup>23</sup>, that is a kind of globalization that is aware of the interconnectedness of all human beings and seeks to foster the life of all. In view of this, and with regard to the quest of the present article, it is crucial to realize that the HIV epidemic increasingly is understood as being embedded in the process of globalization and the resulting inequalities. As the scholars Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside point out in their study on the epidemic, 'this disease is linked to poverty and inequality and the ways that globalisation exacerbates these. Its consequence will be felt for decades to come, and its origins lie far back in time and deep within the structures of social, economic and cultural life.'<sup>24</sup> This understanding is critical to prevailing public opinions in the Western world which often suggest that the African HIV epidemic is a result of a socially and culturally accepted sexual promiscuity. It appears that sexual relations are embedded in socio-economic structures. They cannot be understood but in relation to poverty and gender inequality, which both are related with globalization. Therefore, from an awareness of the shady side of globalization, the Western world is to take seriously the quest for solidarity, especially in the face of HIV&AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.

The quest for solidarity is, among others, a theological one. This has been outlined above from the perspective of African theologians. For a long time, in Western theology the voices of contextual theologians have been ignored. They used to be labelled as "Third world theologies" or "non-Western theologies", and it was scarcely considered what they may bring about to Western theological reflection. Only recently this attitude has begun to change, at least in some parts of Western theology. In the emerging discipline of intercultural theology, theological articulations from all over the world are studied, among others from the perspective how these contextual theologies question, challenge and enrich Atlantic theological debates – which themselves are contextual as well.<sup>25</sup> This change is informed by processes like globalization and migration, and by the move of the centre of Christianity to

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<sup>21</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, 'Memory and Prophecy' in D. G. Groody, ed, *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2007), 17-38 at 32.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality and Justice. Navigating a Path to Peace* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2007), 12.

<sup>23</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (1999), no. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside, *AIDS in the Twenty-First Century: Disease and Globalization*, 2nd ed., (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2006), 30.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Anton Houtepen, 'Intercultural Theology: A Postmodern Ecumenical Mission' in M. T. Frederiks, M. Dijkstra and A. Houtepen, eds, *Towards an Intercultural Theology. Essays in Honour of J.A.B. Jongeneel* (Zoetermeer: Meinema 2003), 23-38 at 29.

the global South. In the words of missiologist Robert Schreiter, these developments lead theology away from its traditional universalizing tendency and bring it to stand between the global and the local. Issues that are raised by contextual theologies are brought into the global theological discourse, in order to come to a new catholicity that provides a theological vision of humanity and society in a global world.<sup>26</sup> Schreiter's concern is that Western theology will not be able to provide a vision of humanity in a globalizing world, when it does not take into account the voices of contextual theologies from all over the world. For a similar reason, theologian Joerg Rieger argues to broaden the horizons of postmodern theology from the experience of people on the margins of the postmodern world. Rieger's critique on postmodern theology is that it respects the value of difference, but does not have a special concern for those who are marginalized and oppressed. This is left to liberation theology with its preferential option for the poor. However, he objects that '[l]iberation theologies are not the special interest theologies of people on the margins.'<sup>27</sup> Rather they are common-interest theologies, because the perspective of people on the margins hold an important key to understand the truth about God and humanity. Therefore, Rieger argues, when postmodern theology is really taking seriously its turn to the other, it should also pay attention to those pushed to the margins of this world. Thus, both Rieger and Schreiter emphasise that doing theology in a globalizing world requires a broadening of the horizon of Western theology. Only then theology can make a difference in understanding the reality it seeks to explore, and the vision it seeks to provide. Contextual and liberation theologies have the task to challenge the global theological discourse, which is still dominated by Western theology, from their local and often marginal position and to remind Western theology to people living at the edges of our globalizing world.

Challenging critically Western theology – I think that is the role of African theologians dealing with HIV&AIDS and calling for global solidarity. What would it mean, then, when their voices indeed are heard and taken seriously, and start to broaden the horizon of theology in the Western world? How a new catholicity in light of HIV&AIDS would look like?

### **Towards a Theology of Global Solidarity in light of HIV&AIDS**

A few Western scholars have already started to reflect upon the HIV epidemic and they emphasize indeed the need for solidarity. Their arguments are informed by several theological notions. Moral theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill, for example, employs the tradition of Catholic social teaching, especially its notions of justice and the common good.<sup>28</sup> These

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1997), 131.

<sup>27</sup> Joerg Rieger, 'Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World' in J. Rieger, ed., *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003), 179-199 at 180-181.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Cahill, 'AIDS, Justice, and the Common Good' in J. Keenan, ed., *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group 2005), 282-293.

notions also are central in a joint publication from an international group of theologians and practitioners, edited by Gillian Paterson.<sup>29</sup> Theologian Elias Bongmba presents the theological concept of the *imago Dei* of humanity as fundamental to the response to the AIDS crisis.<sup>30</sup> In some publications, the notion of the body of Christ is mentioned briefly. For example, the just mentioned book edited by Paterson argues that in a globalizing world and in view of the global HIV epidemic, churches are called to pursue the ideal of the common good in order to 'bring into being the Body of Christ we are constantly in the process of becoming.'<sup>31</sup> Moral theologian Margareth Farley refers to the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ in order to argue that HIV&AIDS is a shared problem in world Christianity:

If the church has AIDS, if the Body of Christ has AIDS, then no Christian is spared this devastation. Insofar as AIDS is a problem for the churches of Africa (or of Australia, East Asia, Europe, or the USA), it is a problem for us all. The gospel comes to us and is received by us – all together across this world; and it calls us not just to assist one another but to stand in solidarity with all, especially with those who are most vulnerable or who suffer the most.<sup>32</sup>

I warmheartedly agree with these references to the body of Christ. However, I think they are to be explored further, as there is much potential in this metaphor. In my opinion, the body of Christ is the most helpful and powerful Christian concept to reflect theologically upon solidarity in the context of the HIV epidemic. Let me explain why exactly this metaphor is so appropriate to come to a theology of solidarity in the face of the global AIDS crisis.

Traditionally, the body of Christ is the classic ecclesiological metaphor for the church, both at the level of the local Christian community and the level of the (inter)national church. As such the metaphor emphasizes the unity of the church. In ecumenical circles it counts for the unity of the diverse Christian churches, and finally for the unity of world Christianity. The metaphor of the body of Christ is employed to transcend the numerous differences between churches and to point to their unity in Christ. Liberation theology has challenged the concern with ecclesial unity by calling attention for solidarity between churches. John Sobrino, for example, clearly states: 'Interconfessional solidarity without a preliminary solidarity with the poor of this world is out of touch with reality, anti-Christian and difficult to achieve in real history.'<sup>33</sup> Sobrino's quest in the 1980s was for Western churches taking co-responsibility with the Latin American churches in their option for the poor. In the same way, nowadays African theologians challenge Western churches to be in solidarity with churches in Africa siding with people in their midst who live with HIV and AIDS. They state that the body of Christ has AIDS and remind us that this body is a global body. In the words

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<sup>29</sup> Gillian Paterson, ed, *HIV Prevention. A Global Theological Conversation* (Geneva: Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance 2009), 19-24.

<sup>30</sup> Elias Bongmba, *Facing a Pandemic: The African Church and the Crisis of HIV/AIDS* (Waco: Baylor University Press 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Paterson, *HIV Prevention. A Global Theological Conversation*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Margareth Farley, 'Prophetic Discourse in a Time of AIDS' in G. Paterson, ed, *HIV Prevention. A Global Theological Conversation* (Geneva: Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance 2009), 57-68 at 61.

<sup>33</sup> John Sobrino and Hernandez Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis books 1985), 25.

of Ackermann, the body of Christ with AIDS is the one, holy, apostolic and catholic church. Thus, the call upon Western churches for global solidarity is related by African scholars with the deep ecclesiological and Christological essence of the churches as part of the body of Christ. That makes the call for solidarity so imperative and urgent. However, not only the fact that the body of Christ is deeply rooted in ecclesiology makes this metaphor so powerful. Additionally, the idea of solidarity in the body of Christ is a very biblical thought. It finds its origins in the Pauline text that is foundational to the ecclesial image of the church as the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12. In his argument, Paul mentions that equal concern for each other, and sharing each other's suffering and joy is a characteristic for the life in the body of Christ. It is exactly this rootedness in both the biblical tradition and classic ecclesiology, which makes the notion of the body of Christ so powerful to draw from when reflecting theologically on global solidarity in the context of the HIV epidemic.

In Latin American liberation theology, the notion of solidarity is very prominent but is scarcely related with the concept of the body of Christ. African theologians, in their quest for solidarity in the face of the HIV epidemic, seem to have rediscovered this classical metaphor. What makes this concept particularly appropriate in the context of the epidemic? In my opinion, this has to do with the very bodily dimension of the metaphor of the body of Christ, in relation to the very bodily impact of AIDS. The virus called HIV has infected millions of bodies, and numerous baby bodies are infected already before they are born. Once infected with HIV, the body is weakened slowly but sure, finally resulting in a total collapse. No vaccine yet has been found to prevent this. And although Anti Retroviral Drugs are becoming available throughout Africa, they are not accessible everywhere and for everyone. HIV&AIDS is a very bodily disease and it will continue to be so, unless a miracle will happen. In this reality, the theological concept of the body of Christ is very powerful. In its Christological dimension, it points to the compassionate body of Jesus Christ who was in solidarity with those who suffer and are marginalized. In its Eucharistic dimension, the body of the crucified yet living Christ is shared as a sign of solidarity and hope, and it creates a Eucharistic communion where people not only partake in the body of Christ but subsequently also in each others bodies.<sup>34</sup> This communion already points to the ecclesiological dimension of the metaphor of the body of Christ. At this level there is a solidarity between people and churches in the body of Christ, which includes not only people's mind and soul but also their body. All this is captured in the short but powerful statement that the body of Christ has AIDS. Time and again, through the media people are faced with the devastating bodily reality of AIDS in other parts of the world. The metaphor of the body of Christ, then, creates a space where people can encounter the situation of their fellow human beings, even so far that it metaphorically affects their own bodies, and from this experience solidarity is born. The body of Christ appeals both to the reality of weakening and collapsing bodies due to AIDS, and to the sense of solidarity of people not being infected

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, and Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007), 133-135.

or affected themselves with the people who are so. Where the concept of solidarity is somewhat abstract, especially when it concerns people in other parts of the world, the body of Christ enables to envision this in a concrete way.

It is important to note that solidarity in the body of Christ does not mean an annexation of the bodily suffering of others. The strength of the metaphor is that on the one hand it preserves difference between people, while at the same time it counts for the communion of people who may be different but are together in life. As theologian Anselm Min phrases it,

The members of [the body of] Christ constitute a community of life sustained and nourished by the life of the same Christ and the same Spirit, and as such they enjoy the most profound and intimate kind of mutual union and fellowship among themselves, which transcends any empirical tie in the world. (...) As a master piece of solidarity, the body preserves otherness but also transcends it in the togetherness of life, suffering, and joy.<sup>35</sup>

As a metaphor counting for both difference and togetherness, the body of Christ offers people and churches in the Western world a place where this togetherness of life is shared with churches in Africa living with AIDS. At the same time it takes into account the difference in situation, as in the Western world AIDS is not the disruptive social experience as it is in Africa. The metaphor prevents Western churches from responding just as an NGO, but it invites them to a more holistic and encompassing response. From the realization that in the body of Christ life is shared in all its facets, something will develop that in liberation theology has been called "common tradition" but which now can be called a common existence in the one body.<sup>36</sup> As part of this, Western churches will side with churches and people in Africa in the face of suffering, disease and death, in the quest for healing, hope, and life, and in the struggle for justice. It is from this sharing that practical solidarity is born and is shaped through transnational relationships.

Up to now, the argument provided here on a theology of solidarity in the body of Christ, focuses on churches and Christians in the Western world. For them, the metaphor is a powerful resource to call for solidarity, because it relates to their understanding of Christ, the Eucharist and the church. They are familiar with the body of Christ and may be willing, therefore, to broaden (or deepen) their understanding of this with a notion of global solidarity. However, theology is not only about churches and Christians. Principally it is concerned with all areas of life and it offers a vision for humanity. Therefore it is crucial to mention that the body of Christ calls not only Western churches and Christians, but the Western world in general to enter into solidarity with people, communities and societies in Africa and elsewhere struck by HIV&AIDS. Above Daniel Groody was cited, who emphasized the need for ethical coordinates and the spiritual vision that helps to envision

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<sup>35</sup> Anselm Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: A Postmodern Theology After Postmodernism* (New York: T. & T. Clark Publishers 2004), 148.

<sup>36</sup> About the notion of a common tradition in liberation theology, see Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor. The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 1998), 200-203.

human solidarity in a globalizing world. In my opinion the metaphor of the body of Christ is a powerful resource for such ethical coordinates and vision in the context of globalization, and especially in view of the HIV epidemic. One may object that this notion is too Christian to count for global solidarity. Indeed, it is a notion deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, and there should be searched for resources with a similar potential in other religious traditions. One further may object that the body of Christ often has been used to bring separation rather than solidarity. Indeed, as a metaphor for the church it often has been used to divide those who are part of the body and those who are not, separating the church from the world. However, it is significant that African theologians in their reflection on the body of Christ often present a very inclusive understanding. For example, Philomena Mwaura expresses her perception of all human beings as members of the body of Christ. She explains this eschatologically, saying: 'We are all co-joined in its pain [of the body of Christ, AvK] and the eventual eschatological triumph over all suffering.'<sup>37</sup> In line with this, Anselm Min points to the cosmic or Trinitarian dimension of the body of Christ, where the whole of creation is considered as Christ's body:

The body of Christ is essentially a Trinitarian event. The creation of the material universe, the cosmic body of Christ, the redemption of humanity as the wounded and suffering body of Christ, the re-creation of both history and nature as participation in the risen body – all these are rooted in the eternal solidarity or perichoresis of the immanent Trinity.<sup>38</sup>

Here, solidarity is not only rooted in the essence of the church as body of Christ, but in the essence of creation as body of Christ participating in the Triune God. Therefore, the body of Christ is characterised by a 'self-expanding dynamic of solidarity' to include all humanity and all creation.<sup>39</sup> In view of the current context of globalization and HIV&AIDS, the question arises what it means to imagine the world and humanity as body of Christ. Clearly, it calls for solidarity of the Western world with sub-Saharan Africa. Theologian Michael Kamanzi elaborates upon this 'imperative of solidarity' of the international community and points, among others, to issues as the relief of the external debt of African countries, food security, the supply of Anti Retroviral drugs, assistance with HIV education, prevention, care and treatment.<sup>40</sup> From the metaphor of the body of Christ, critical questions are to be raised concerning the social, economic and political inequalities that characterize our globalizing world and that facilitate the spread and impact of the epidemic. These are crucial issues when imagining the world as the body of Christ with AIDS. However, Kamazi notes that next to financial, scientific and technical aid from the international community to the African continent struck by AIDS, human, psychological and spiritual support are just as

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<sup>37</sup> Philomena Mwaura, 'Stigmatization and Discrimination of HIV/AIDS Women in Kenya: A Violation of Human Rights and its Theological Implications', *Exchange. Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, 37:1 (2008), 35-51 at 49, see also 51.

<sup>38</sup> Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World*, 149.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Kamanzi, 'Solidarity, a New Categorical Imperative' in B. Bujo and M. Czerny, eds, *AIDS in Africa. Theological Reflection* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 2007), 17-30 at 27-28.

important. The metaphor of the body of Christ provides a vision for both types of international solidarity in the context of AIDS, as solidarity in this body always has a sense of interdependence and togetherness and thus has a human face.

## **Conclusion**

In face with the current AIDS crisis, the classic theological metaphor of the body of Christ appears to have a rich potential meaning for the world today. It is not only a powerful concept for theological reflection in sub-Saharan Africa where AIDS has caused a social and spiritual crisis, but it also challenges theology in the Western world. The central meaning of the metaphor in relation to the HIV epidemic is in its notion of solidarity. This is to be applied in African churches and communities, but also in the transnational relationships between churches and in the world community. This article has explored the meaning of the metaphor as a call for solidarity, especially global solidarity with sub-Saharan Africa. This is not to say that there is no solidarity in the world today. There are many expressions of solidarity with people and communities infected and affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa arising from the Western world. The metaphor of the body of Christ not only presents a call for solidarity, but also enables to identify the expressions of solidarity and to define these theologically as manifestation of the body of Christ. Having said this, I underscore the reference above to the body of Christ as an eschatological event. It is a body in the process of becoming, and as such it is constantly reconstituting churches and communities in the world, including the world as a global community. This invites us to an increasing awareness of our interdependence and togetherness, and a growing spirit of solidarity. In the context of the HIV epidemic in Africa and elsewhere, this will mean that in the Western world we never can get used to the disease affecting millions of people but imagine their suffering to affect our own lives, and continue to reflect critically both upon the realities that facilitate the epidemic and the ways to be in solidarity with the people living with HIV and AIDS.