

Rooting in the Original Instructions: From Ethical Imperatives to Pluriversal Governance

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*Theme: "The Ethical Foundations of Global Governance: Towards a Renewed Agenda
for Shared Prosperity, International Cooperation and Peacebuilding"*

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Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a privilege to be here at a critical moment for the Church. But also a critical moment for humanity.

This is a moment of profound reckoning. The global architecture of modernity is fraying at the seams. As mentioned by His Eminence Cardinal Pietro Parolin and previous speakers,¹ whether it is the climate catastrophe or rising inequality. Whether it is violent conflict or a collapse of trust in institutions. Whether it is a world where the legitimacy of intelligence or leadership is questioned - where the lines between what is natural or artificial are blurred - we are in crisis. And the polycrisis (Pope Francis, 2025) before us is not merely a political or economic or ecological one. It is a crisis of ethics. It is a rupture in the sacred covenant of relationship: between self and other, between people and planet, between spirit and matter.

If governance is the architecture by which we steward the commons, then ethics is its foundation. And today, that foundation must be re-visited. It must be re-imagined. It must be re-anchored.

I speak to you as one initiated in many traditions — be they scientific, ancestral or spiritual. As a daughter of Africa, I draw on the teachings of Ubuntu, Sankofa, and the Original Instructions carried by Earth Elders (Earth Elders, n.d.) across generations and across the globe. In re-

¹ Spoken presentations by keynote speakers at the *Centesimus Annus Pro-Pontifice Foundation* General Assembly International Conference 2025, Plenary Session "Overcoming Polarizations and Rebuilding Global Governance: The Ethical Foundations". 16 May 2025

imagining global governance today, I bring with me Indigenous Knowledge Systems - those systems that catalyse the wisdoms of rivers, the wisdoms of ancestors, and the wisdoms of the expansiveness of the Earth herself.

Engaging the Paradigm

When engaging Ethical Foundations of Global Governance, it is important to consider the paradigm in which we have this conversation. And more than that, we need to consider the paradigm that breeds the polycrises of our times.

In that we need to consider natural *versus* artificially constructed intelligence. An intelligence that has been passed down from generation to generation, through ancestral lineages, linking all the way back to the Original Instructions or natural laws that were common to all peoples.

For this we must turn to the Indigenous Knowledge Systems of the world - systems that have sadly been illegitimised and invalidated by modern science and the dominant paradigm (Odora Hoppers, 2002) ... yet have sustained ecosystems for millennia. I would argue that these ancient wisdoms or ancestral intellectuality are a *science* (Ngara, 2012). They are a way of knowing. A way of doing. A way of sustaining.

From Cognitive Violence to Cognitive Justice

Johan Galtung named three violences: the direct violence, the structural violence, the cultural violence (Galtung, 1996; Galtung, 2002).

I offer a fourth: **cognitive violence** (Odora Hoppers, 2009). This is the quietest, and perhaps the most deadly. It is the silencing of memory. The ridicule of vision. It is the deletion of maps drawn in stars, in scars, in dreams. This is the violation of epistemic ecosystems.

When the Earth is treated as a commodity and not kin, that is cognitive violence. When languages that carry the codes of healing are lost, that is cognitive violence. When children are taught that the moon is a rock but not a relative, that too is cognitive violence.

Peace cannot arise from a mind at war with itself. Nor can governance thrive on amputated knowledge. The healing of the world requires the *remembering* of the world.

For this we need **cognitive justice** (Odora Hoppers, 2009) - a concept coined and enhanced by professors Shiv Visvanathan and Catherine Odora Hoppers. In a world of multiple violences - global governance requires cognitive justice - the right of multiple knowledge systems to co-exist - and to co-exist without duress.

In this critical time of revolution as we heard yesterday², cognitive justice is not merely inclusion, but co-evolution. It is not charity, but dignity. It is not hierarchy, but harmony.

Introducing African Indigenous Principles

Rooting Ethics in Ubuntu

Yesterday we heard about the open-source *technological* operating system called Ubuntu³ (Canonical Ltd., n.d.) - developed by South African, Mark Shuttleworth (Bacon, 2020).

Today I wish to remain in Africa and speak about **Ubuntu**, but this time as a *cosmological* operating system.

Ubuntu (in the Nguni languages of Southern Africa) is also known as *Botho* in Sesotho or *Hunhu* in Shona from Zimbabwe. The principle is often rendered as “A person is a person through other persons” or “I am because you are” (Bhengu, 2006; Tutu, 1999), but its depth lies beyond humanism. Its meaning lies beyond anthropocentric understandings. It is a cosmology of inter-being. It is an understanding that the self emerges only through the other, that identity is relational, and that well-being is communal.

In African metaphysics, the term Ubuntu derives from the proto-Bantu root -*NTU* (Jahn, 1961; Kagame, 1970; Ngara, 2007; Phillips, 1990). This is the cosmic life force that expresses itself in all things. It expresses itself as *MuNTU* or reasoned beings - people. It expresses itself as *KiNTU* - nature and objects. It expresses itself as *HaNTU* - the convergence of time and space (a principle quantum physics only caught up with in the early 20th century). It expresses itself as *KuNTU* - a modality, a quality, a potential.

Ubuntu, then, is not merely social morality — it is a universal principle of interconnectedness, interdependence and interrelatedness (Amen, 1990). Ubuntu reminds us that ethics is not a code we write — it is a web we live within.

In a world severed by extraction and exclusion, Ubuntu urges us to shift from governance over to governance *with* — to move from systems of control to systems of care. Here, prosperity is not accumulation, but the thriving of the whole. It is the human and more-than-human.

² Spoken presentation by Giacomo Mazzone at the *Centesimus Annus Pro-Pontifice Foundation* General Assembly International Conference 2025, Plenary Session “How Catholic Social Thought Contributes to Responsible Leadership Dialogue and Cooperation in a Polarized World”. 15 May 2025

³ Spoken keynote address by H.E. Msgr Giordano Piccinotti at the *Centesimus Annus Pro-Pontifice Foundation* General Assembly International Conference 2025, Parallel Session “Artificial Intelligence and new technologies: How to guarantee the integrity of communication and build trust in a polarised world”. 15 May 2025

To govern with Ubuntu is to restore balance where it has been broken. It means recognising that peace is not merely the absence of violence (Galtung, 1996; Galtung, 2002; Ngara & Bhengu, 2010; Odora Hoppers, 2013) but it is the presence of right relationship. It is a teaching that resonates with the principle of *Ma'at* in ancient Kemet (Ancient Egypt) (Amen, 1990; Karenga, 2002; Karenga, 2009; Martin, 2008), it is about truth. It is about order. It is about harmony. It is about reciprocity.

Grounding Ethics in Sankofa

There is another principle I would like to bring to the floor. This is the Ghanaian Adinkra symbol of ***Sankofa***, which urges us to “*go back and fetch it*” (Adinkra Symbols, n.d.; Deterville, 2016; Temple, 2010).

The indigenous symbol is usually depicted as a bird turning back on itself - with an egg or a seed in its beak. This is not nostalgia. It is an ethical imperative. It is a call to re-member what has been dis-membered. It is a return to right alignment.

Sankofa — the sacred bird who turns her head backward to fetch the egg upon her back — teaches us about the grammar of return. It is a call to go back and fetch what has been forgotten. Not to cling to past forms, but to remember past wisdoms.

From an expanded perspective, Sankofa is the universal principle of feedback found in various systems in both the natural and human-made world (Ngara, 2024). It is found in temperature regulation, in breathing cycles, in the predator-prey cycle, in operational amplifiers in engineering. It is found in the market, climate or systems of economics. Feedback implies circularity across time and space, a circularity that creates an output greater than its input. And when positive feedback works in tandem with negative feedback, the Sankofa symbol changes from a bird to that of a stylised heart. In this expanded view of Sankofa, is the imperative for an economy of love.

In this act of remembering, we enact what Professors Howard Richards and Catherine Odora Hoppers call **transformation by enlargement** (Odora Hoppers & Richards, 2012) — not replacing one knowledge system with another, but expanding our epistemic table to include the silenced, to include the ancestral, to include the indigenous. Global governance is an impetus that transforms the excluded into the included and brings the marginalised voices to the core.

Catholicity as a Universal Mandate

In this way perhaps we can be truly *Catholic*. Perhaps we can be truly *universal*. But in defining catholic as universal (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) I speak of a universality that does not arise from sameness. It is born of depth — a spaciousness capable of holding plurality without

assimilation. Perhaps we are called to move beyond the aspiration of global or universal governance to **pluriversal governance**.

In the teachings of Pope Francis, particularly in *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis, 2015), we are invited to return to the sacredness of the Earth and the dignity of all life. These resonate deeply with Indigenous philosophies across the globe.

As the Earth Elders remind us — governance must not be severed from the Original Instructions: that we live in balance, listen to the land, and pass forward more than we have received. These instructions are not abstract.

They are encoded in ceremony.

They are encoded in ecology.

They are encoded in story.

As cognitive justice demands, let these pluriversal ways co-exist ... without duress.

From Positivism to Participatory Pluralism

We are told that we must be efficient. That knowledge must be objective. That governance must be impersonal. But what if this, too, is a kind of forgetting?

The crisis before us will not be solved through technocratic fixes alone [as our previous speaker has said].⁴ The documents of this very conference remind us that positivism is not sufficient (Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation, 2025). We require a normative, participatory, soul-infused approach.

Science is necessary — but not enough. Markets are necessary — but not sufficient. Algorithms are necessary — but not sovereign.

We must bring Spirit back into the centre of our discourse. Let decisions be made in circles, where every voice reshapes the centre. Let us govern as though the world is alive — because it is. Let us govern with heart, as well as mind.

Nature as Mandate, Not Metaphor

We must let Nature be epistemological anchor. Nature not as a metaphor, not as a backdrop to our policies. But Nature as a teacher. Nature as a mandate. From the volcanic wounds of the East African Rift that birth fertile soil (Chorowicz, 2005), to the parched salt pans of Makgadikgadi where rivers once flowed (Cooke, 1979), the Earth speaks to us of renewal.

⁴ Spoken presentations by keynote speakers at the *Centesimus Annus Pro-Pontifice Foundation* General Assembly International Conference 2025, Plenary Session "Overcoming Polarizations and Rebuilding Global Governance: The Ethical Foundations". 16 May 2025

The Earth speaks to us about rupture.

The Earth speaks to us about return.

The African cosmological principles of *Ubuntu* or *Ma'at* teach us that injustice anywhere causes imbalance everywhere. Earth jurisprudence reminds us that the rights of rivers, the rights of mountains, and the rights of non-human kin must be enshrined in law and lived in practice.

Nature is not scenery.

Nature is sanctuary.

Nature is scripture.

A Call to Covenant

We stand not at a crossroads, but at a threshold.

Crossroads offer choices.

Thresholds demand initiation.

We are not here merely to trans-form or re-form institutions. We are here to **renew a covenant** — a sacred agreement between peoples, between generations, between species.

What might governance look like if it began with prayer, with silence, or with listening to the land?

What if the United Nations had a Pluriversal Council of Earth Elders?

What if peace negotiations included water, forests, and the unborn?

What if budget lines included soul lines?

What if diplomacy walked barefoot, and spoke with the humility?

Imagine institutions that begin their reports not with GDP, but with the state of the soul.

What if the future was not something we engineered — but something we **belonged to**?

We must move from governance as control to governance as stewardship.

From metrics to meaning.

From intervention to intercession.

If Ethics Followed the Flow of the River

As we journey through this conference — let us remember that the most enduring architecture is not built of stone - it is built of story.

What if shared prosperity were at the core?

Let us write new myths for our time:

ones where the river is not dammed, the marginalised are not silenced, the soil not poisoned.

Let us write myths where difference is not deviance, and plurality is not a problem.
Let us write myths not of conquest, but of kinship.

What if international cooperation was forefront?

What if we let *Ubuntu* weave into our treaties?
Or embed *Sankofa* in our curricula?
Or hold *Ma'at* in our metrics?

What if peacebuilding was the centre?

What if we let our pluriversal governance flow with multiplicity, nourish complexity, and open into generative spaces?

Let us be in communion and not contamination.

Let us move from a governance of dominion or domination - to one of *dumela*.

*Dumela*⁵ is the Sesotho greeting - in the language of my mother - which says, "I am in agreement with you".

Where to see another is to believe them into being.

In the spirit of *dumela* - let us be in harmony – and perhaps resonance - with the essence of life itself.

Let us follow the way of the river (Ngara, 2018) — and become, once more, custodians of the sacred.

Thokozani. Camagu. Tatenda. Ashé.

⁵ Also spelt *lumela* in Southern Sesotho

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Personal Communication

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