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A Case for Christian Communalism:
Overcoming Individualism and Racial Segregation in an Ubuntu-Infused
South African Catholic Parish

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Geographic, linguistic, and economic divisions between ethnic groups linger from Apartheid; but recent concerns also include divisions within ethnic groups due to Western-influenced individualism and a decline in communal values known as ubuntu. Ubuntu is a spiritual concept; thus, Christianity seems to be the ideal context for its reinforcement. But most theorists would argue that the physical and figurative walls being constructed between and within ethnic groups could not be overcome through Christianity, which is itself considered to be individualistic “self-serving redemptionism”—the theoretical opposite of ubuntu.

However, one East London Catholic parish creates an anomalous interracial community by promoting communal ubuntu values, and thus defies theoretical arguments of Christian individualism and the actual segregations and divisions prevalent in East London.

Ubuntu was locally defined as including both “bringing people together” and “sharing.”

- “Bringing people together” occurs through highly structured and controlled worship, which seeks to unify parishioners into a universal church culture.
- “Sharing” and interaction occur through hand-holding, hand-shaking, call-and-response music, participation in extra-Mass “ministries,” and a sharing of ethnic cultures.

A parishioner said, “You know, we pray together. We believe that it’s better to worship together than to worship in private.” His wife added, ”If you choose to be a Catholic, then...,“ and her husband finished, ”...then you must be part of the community, and the community of worship, and the communalism of the church. The Catholic Church doesn’t allow for a lot of individualism. You can’t be a Catholic and not go to church. Yeah, well, I pray at home, I worship at home—it’s not going to be acceptable. The Catholic Church does not allow for that kind of individualism.”