

Christophe Munzihirwa and Abundant Life in Africa: Witnessing to an African Theological Ethic

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Abstract: Why does ‘abundant life’ for all God’s people in Africa seem so elusive? Why is the story of Africa one of pain, suffering, violence, and death? Amidst the plunder and exploitation of Africa’s resources and the ongoing decimation of human and environmental lives, what difference can Christianity in Africa make in addressing the continent’s social crises? In analyzing the African predicament through the lens of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the continent’s minerally wealthy yet most despoiled country, this essay spotlights the life, ministry, and struggles of the slain Congolese archbishop Christophe Munzihirwa, SJ (1926–96). The article shows how Munzihirwa’s theological convictions and socio-pastoral praxis undergird his struggles for abundant life in his own country and among his own people. The essay argues that the struggle for abundant life is not merely a theological and pastoral necessity for the church in Africa but also a moral imperative. At the heart of this moral imperative is the invitation for Christian leaders and people in Africa to constructively engage the challenges facing the continent through discerning attentiveness to the signs of the times in their own specific situations and contexts.

THE LATE TANZANIAN CATHOLIC PRIEST AND THEOLOGIAN Laurenti Magesa is often thought to have pioneered and prioritized the notion of abundant life in his theological works, although he explicitly links it to the African (not specifically Christian) understanding of and approach to life characterized by the integration of the natural/physical, human, and spiritual dimensions of existence, which makes the health, well-being, and harmonious coexistence of both the human and non-human creation possible.¹ Abundant life, for Magesa, involves all aspects of African spirituality that combine “to make sense of the world and render life livable in a

¹ See Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Orbis Books, 1997); Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality* (Orbis Books, 2013).

comprehensive manner. It constitutes the direction persons take to give meaning to their existence as persons.”²

Although Magesa has been criticized for his unambiguous classification of African religions as “traditions of abundant life” while overlooking “life negating” elements in the tradition,³ other African theologians such as Stan Chu Ilo and SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai have tried to provide an African Christian theological framework for the notion of abundant life, grounded in an African reception of the teaching of Jesus Christ.⁴ In a volume on the search for abundant life in African Christian religion, Ilo writes: “The heart of the Christian religion in Africa is the search for human and cosmic flourishing and the desire for wholeness and abundant life.”⁵ Ilo believes that African Christian theologians have for a long time tried, rather unsuccessfully, to interpret African Christian faith and practices through Western conceptual frameworks and theological models. He argues that African Christian thinkers need to rise up to the task of telling “the African Christian story from the margins through the everyday experiences of African Christians in their undying faith in Jesus Christ.”⁶ He challenges African Christian theologians and scholars to endeavor “to answer the question as to how African Christian religion is helping to solve the African enigma or the African predicament.”⁷

² Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred*, 28.

³ Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Morality Truly Christian Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 78–85.

⁴ Stan Chu Ilo, ed., *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life* (Lexington Books, 2018). SimonMary Asese Ahiokhai assesses the enduring contribution of Magesa to African theology and theology in general as that of “reclaiming elements of African social and ethical thought to articulate a theological ethics of abundant life for his fellow Africans and the world in general.” See Ahiokhai, “‘And You, Africans, Who Do You Say Jesus Is?’: The Legacy of Laurenti Magesa for the Future of African Theology,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 1 (2024), 15–36.

⁵ Stan Chu Ilo, “The Search for Abundant Life in African Christian Religion: Historical Reinterpretation of Christian Mission in Africa,” in *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life* (Lexington Books, 2018), xvii.

⁶ Ilo, “The Search for Abundant Life,” xvi.

⁷ Ilo, “The Search for Abundant Life,” xvi. Although Ilo is critical of the uncritical embrace of western theological models by African theologians in their explication of the African religious and social experience, it needs to be pointed out here that the genealogy of the theological grammar of abundant life is not confined to the African context. For several decades, Latin American theologians have adopted the notion of life, its abundance, and the struggle for it, in contexts marked by suffering, violence, and oppression, as a central theme of Latin American theology. For some important works that expound the theology of abundant life from the Latin American perspective, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Orbis Books, 1991); and María

In African theological studies, the ethics of abundant life is affirmed as the divine gift that forms the bedrock for human and ecological flourishing. It is “a holistic model for understanding salvation”⁸ which leads to the promotion of societal reform. In the African religious worldview, the authentic flourishing of humans and the environment has both this-worldly and other-worldly dimensions. Martina Prosén, a Swedish Pentecostal theologian raised in Rwanda, captures these two dimensions:

For many African Christians, salvation starts here and now, in this world, and it includes physical aspects such as health and material blessing, emotional aspects such as inner healing, relational aspects such as reconciliation or the gift of having children, and sometimes socio-political aspects such as democracy, justice and peace. At the same time, it involves spiritual aspects such as experiencing peace with God, forgiveness from sin and freedom from the power of evil spirits. And, of course, it involves also the eternal hope of life in a different kind of world, once this earthly life has come to an end. Thus, salvation is thought to include both this-worldly and other-worldly aspects and so involves the whole of human life.⁹

Herein lies the problem: a close examination of Africa reveals that the realization of the continent’s aspiration for the this-worldly dimension of abundant life is still a long way off. Africa is a continent that cannot be said to be enjoying abundant life in the true sense of the word. While Christianity continues to grow demographically in the continent (as of 2020, Christians constituted 62 per cent of sub-Saharan Africa’s population of 1.1 billion people),¹⁰ other important indices of human flourishing are plummeting. Political instability poses a significant challenge in Africa. “Between 2020 and 2022, the continent experienced six successful military coups, including two instances of intra-coup

Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Orbis Books, 1993). In western theology, while the notion of abundant life is not so prominent, scholars such as the ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague have used the concept to critique the dominant middle-class North American crisis of consumer-oriented lifestyle and to develop an alternative ecological-economic model of planetary flourishing. See McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Fortress Press, 2001).

⁸ Martina Prosén, “Abundant Life—Holistic Soteriology as Motivation for Socio-Political Engagement: A Pentecostal and Missional Perspective,” in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. E. K. Bongmba (Routledge, 2020), 303.

⁹ Martina Prosén, “Abundant Life—On African Soteriology,” *Religion in Praxis*, June 3, 2020, religioninpraxis.com/abundant-life-on-african-soteriology/.

¹⁰ Conrad Hackett, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi, and Dalia Fahmy, “How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020,” *Pew Research Center*, June 9, 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/06/09/how-the-global-religious-landscape-changed-from-2010-to-2020).

conflicts and three attempted coups.”¹¹ This does not include the many states where democracy is backsliding and new forms of authoritarianism are emerging. More than half the countries in sub-Saharan Africa today are at the lowest rung of the ladder in global metrics of human development. In the *Human Development Report 2023/2024*, twenty-nine of forty-six sub-Saharan African countries ranked as “low human development” countries on all three basic indices: a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living.¹² These are not just cold statistics; they represent millions of African lives that face tragedies, diseases, hunger, violence, abuses, suffering, and losses on a daily basis. Despite the huge wealth of the continent, Africa seems trapped in “a chokehold of history.”¹³ Ilo has challenged African theologians to critically examine the African experience through “social autopsy,” believing that by studying death we gain the capacity to understand life and to protect it. Thus, he asks: “How would we understand the suffering in Africa today if we did a social autopsy of the *excess deaths* or *stupid deaths* or *deaths of misfortune* occurring in Africa today?”¹⁴

The aim of this article is to reflect theologically on the yearning for abundant life in Africa, drawing some lessons from the life, ministry, and martyrdom of the Congolese archbishop Servant of God Monsignor Christophe Munzihirwa, SJ (1926–96). Munzihirwa lived at a time of great distress and suffering in the Great Lakes region of Africa. He was killed in the midst of his struggles and advocacy for a better life for his people, especially the millions of refugees that poured into the DRC in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. Dubbed as the ‘Romero of Congo’ and as the ‘Romero of Africa,’¹⁵ Munzihirwa’s struggles and martyrdom shed light on the ongoing sacrifice of African lives in various machineries of death that bestride the continent and the ease with which this disposability of human lives has become normalized. While he is a popular figure in his country and region, he is not well-known across the continent of Africa and in

¹¹ Nathaniel Ellis, “Political Instability in the Global South: The Rise of Military Coups in Africa and Their Economic Implications,” *Atlas Institute for International Affairs*, March 10, 2025, atlasinstitute.org/political-instability-in-the-global-south-the-rise-of-military-coups-in-africa-and-their-economic-implications/.

¹² UNDP, *Human Development Report 2023/2024* (UNDP, 2024), 274–276.

¹³ Stan Chu Ilo, *Where Is God? An African Theology of Suffering and Smiling* (Orbis Books, 2025), 34.

¹⁴ Ilo, *Where Is God*, 15.

¹⁵ Elise Ann Allen, “Pope Extols ‘Romero of Africa’ as Role Model for Congo’s Bishops,” *Crux*, February 3, 2023, cruxnow.com/pope-in-south-sudan-congo/2023/02/pope-extols-romero-of-africa-as-role-model-for-congos-bishops.

the English-speaking world. Moreover, few works have been published about him in the English language.¹⁶

By exploring the contours of Munzihirwa's life and advocacy in relation to the quest for abundant life in Africa today, this article provides incentives for a broader theological and public appreciation of the man and what he lived and died for. In addition, it offers Christians in Africa and elsewhere, especially those in distressing contexts, some theological and pastoral resources for discerning how to respond to the challenges of their own situations. I argue that the core of Munzihirwa's struggle as archbishop of Bukavu was a deep and abiding desire to see abundant life—the fruits of Christ's redeeming death and resurrection—shared by all, especially those at the margins of life. Through a theological portrait of his life and advocacy, I will show how Munzihirwa tried to centralize the ethic of abundant life in his own life and ministry, and what Christians in Africa today can learn from his struggles. To en flesh this thesis, I will analyze the African predicament through the lens of Munzihirwa's own country—the DRC.

CHRISTOPHE MUNZIHIRWA: THE NARRATIVE OF A LIFE

Christophe Munzihirwa Mwene Ngabo was born in Lukumbo, a village in South Kivu province, in the eastern region of the DRC (then known as Zaire), in 1926. He studied at the minor seminary in Mugeru. Thereafter, he had his priestly formation at the major seminary of Nyakubanda in Rwanda but later continued at Moba in the DRC. On August 17, 1958, he was ordained a priest for the diocese of Bukavu. After his ordination, he served at the cathedral parish of Bukavu, becoming parish priest and dean. In 1963, Munzihirwa excardinated from Bukavu diocese and entered the Society of Jesus, making his solemn profession on September 9, 1965. From 1965 to 1966, he studied at St Peter Canisius Institute for Philosophy in Kinshasa, and from 1967 to 1969, he studied at the University of Leuven in Belgium, where he earned a master's degree in social science and economics. Returning to the DRC in 1969, he was appointed a chaplain at the University of Kinshasa. In 1971, while he served as formation director of Jesuit seminarians, the Zairean government of Mobutu Sese Seko ordered all able-bodied students, including seminarians, to be drafted for military service as a punitive measure for a series of student

¹⁶ See Emmanuel Katongole, "Christopher Munzihirwa and the Politics of Nonviolent Love" in *Born From Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Eerdmans, 2017), 164–178; Christophe Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon Is Love: The Essential Writings of Christophe Munzihirwa*, SJ, ed. and trans. John Kiess (Cascade Books, 2024).

protests. As Munzihirwa could not defy this forced conscription, he went alongside his seminarians and enlisted for military service, shaming the government by the presence of a 45-year-old priest among the young soldiers. Munzihirwa's rise through the ranks of the Jesuit order began shortly afterwards. After making his final vows in 1975, he studied for his doctorate in sociology at the University of Lubumbashi, while also serving as vicar superior of the Jesuit student house in the same university. In 1978, Munzihirwa became rector of St Peter Canisius Institute for Philosophy in Kinshasa.

In 1980, the Jesuit Superior General Father Pedro Arrupe appointed Munzihirwa as provincial of the Jesuits in Central Africa (covering Rwanda, the DRC, and Burundi). He held this post until 1986, when Pope John Paul II appointed him the coadjutor bishop of the diocese of Kasongo, in eastern DRC. He became the substantive bishop of Kasongo in 1990. In 1993, due to the vacancy in Bukavu, Munzihirwa was appointed apostolic administrator of the archdiocese. In March 1994, Pope John Paul II promoted him to the office of archbishop of Bukavu.¹⁷ The two and half years that he served as archbishop were perhaps the most difficult period of his life. He had scarcely settled into his new post when the Rwandan genocide broke out in April 1994. Munzihirwa was in Rome at this time, participating in the first Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Africa (April–May 1994). When he was installed as archbishop on June 26, 1994, the Rwandan genocide was still unfolding. Meanwhile, more than a million refugees had poured from Rwanda into the eastern part of the DRC, and right into Bukavu. Emmanuel Katongole captures the situation:

The arrival of so many refugees there and in the neighboring villages created an immediate humanitarian crisis. The city was crowded; the countryside was overpopulated; trees were cut down for firewood and to make spaces on which to pitch makeshift tents; the population was hungry; and there was fear of an outbreak of cholera and/or other diseases. At the same time, armed gangs—made up of undisciplined, underpaid, and demoralized Zairean soldiers, plus Rwandan *Interahamwe* youth militias (many of whom had committed genocide in Rwanda)—roamed the streets, terrorizing the population, extorting

¹⁷ Munzihirwa's biography here has been reconstructed from multiple sources: Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 4–5; César Mateso W. Akeso, "Munzihirwa, Mwene Ngabo," in *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, n.d., dacb.org/stories/democratic-republic-of-congo/munzihirwa; Meg Hunter-Kilmer, "Friends of Ignatius: Christophe Munzihirwa," *Jesuits*, n.d., jesuits.org/stories/friends-of-ignatius-christophe-munzihirwa; and Francis Mutesa, "Witnesses of Jubilee. Mons. Christophe Munzihirwa: A Prophet of Hope," *South World*, May 1, 2025, southworld.net/witnesses-of-jubilee-mons-christophe-munzihirwa-a-prophet-of-hope/.

money from the refugees, and pillaging the towns and homes of the local population.¹⁸

In the face of the mounting refugee crisis, Munzihirwa adopted various strategies to respond to the problem. He held meetings with military leaders, urging them to protect and not extort or terrorize the already traumatized population; he wrote letters to several influential leaders around the world, including the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (twice), US President Jimmy Carter, Misereor (development aid organization of the Catholic Church in Germany), Caritas International, UNCHR, and other local and international church leaders, including Belgian Cardinal Godfried Danneels (president of Pax Christi International), and Monsignor Jacques Delaporte (Justice and Peace, France), alerting them to the situation on ground and appealing for international pressure on the Rwandan government to welcome back its citizens. As he said in a letter to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in October 1995, “The refugees find themselves stuck: Zaire no longer wants them, and Rwanda does not really want them.”¹⁹ Munzihirwa also met with the chief of the Zairean armed forces and the deputy defense minister to find a lasting solution to the problems; he held Mass with the refugees and with the soldiers and wrote letters of pastoral solicitude to them.

During this period, Munzihirwa ministered to the refugees and stood as an outspoken champion of their dignity and rights. He spoke with prophetic courage, calling for compassionate treatment of the refugees and advocating for reconciliation beyond ethnicity. On October 28, 1996, as Rwandan forces, largely from the minority Tutsi ethnic group, advanced toward the eastern region of the DRC in pursuit of Hutu militants whom they believed Mobutu’s crumbling regime was harboring, there was palpable fear across the region. Munzihirwa “was all that stood between hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees and potential annihilation. He had long criticized all parties to the violence. His last hope, shared with the handful of missionaries and diocesan personnel who stayed with him, was for rapid intervention by the international community.”²⁰

In the morning of October 29, Munzihirwa went to a convent nearby to rescue two Tutsi Trappist nuns who felt unsafe as a result of the threats they were receiving from a local group of militants. Afterwards, he went to a local radio station to provide an update on

¹⁸ Katongole, *Born From Lament*, 164.

¹⁹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 155.

²⁰ John L. Allen Jr., “Sixteen Years Ago, Death Came for the Archbishop,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 29, 2012, nronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/sixteen-years-ago-today-death-came-archbishop.

the situation. He later went to a meeting of civil society leaders to brainstorm on how to save the city in view of the impending attack of Rwandan troops. He was returning to his residence at the Jesuit Alfajiri School when he was stopped at a military checkpoint by Rwandan soldiers. He came out of the vehicle clutching a crucifix in his hand; he identified himself to the soldiers who proceeded to interrogate him before the commander raised his gun and shot him on the spot. Munzihirwa's driver and his aide who were with him were also killed. The soldiers left his corpse in the open and deserted street until a group of Xaverian priests recovered his corpse the next day. He was laid to rest in a wooden coffin outside the cathedral of Bukavu archdiocese on October 31, 1996.²¹

Munzihirwa foresaw his end and was prepared for it. Despite the obvious risks associated with the pastoral ministry that he took on during the period, he did not abandon his people but stood firmly by them to the end. As a Jesuit, a prophet of social justice and a martyr, Munzihirwa is a model of Christlike leadership and pastoral sensitivity in the face of untold suffering. John Kiess writes: "For Munzihirwa, journeying into the mystery of a God who suffers with humanity entailed entering into deeper solidarity with the sufferings of others."²² While speaking to the Congolese bishops during his apostolic journey to the DRC in February 2023, Pope Francis extolled Munzihirwa as "a courageous shepherd and prophetic voice, who defended his people by offering his life." He urged church leaders in the DRC to model their ministry on Munzihirwa's example of bold, courageous, and selfless witnessing to the values of the Gospel, noting that "the seeds he planted in this land, along with many others, will bear fruit."²³

THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: A FIELD OF BLOOD?

The Democratic Republic of Congo provides an interesting testcase of both the absence of and struggle for abundant life. Munzihirwa's assassination in 1996 occurred at a crucial period in the country's history when the Congo wars began. Popularly known as the "green lung" and as the "second lung of the world" due to the massive carbon sink capacity of the Congo Basin rainforest, the DRC has been a boiling cauldron for three decades. In the struggle to control territory and mineral resources, hundreds of armed rebel groups and government forces have unleashed violence on the Congolese people. It is

²¹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 24.

²² Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 2.

²³ Pope Francis, "Meeting with Bishops: Apostolic Journey to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan," February 3, 2023, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/february/documents/20230203-vescovi-repdem-congo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/february/documents/20230203-vescovi-repdem-congo.html).

estimated that over five million lives have been lost since the Congo wars began.²⁴ In 2023, the country had the second highest population of internally displaced persons in the world, with 6.9 million.²⁵ In the episode of violence that broke out in January 2025 in the North Kivu province, nearly 3,000 Congolese were killed, with over 2,800 wounded, and 700,000 displaced. Elian Peltier, the West Africa correspondent for *The New York Times*, who visited Goma—the epicenter of the violence—to assess the situation, reported that “rarely have so many been killed within just a few days.”²⁶

In November 2025, a makeshift bridge at a cobalt and copper mining site in Lualaba province collapsed, causing the deaths of many persons. While official report put the number of deaths at thirty two, various social media accounts reported between seventy and one hundred lives. These tragedies are not isolated incidents; they are part and parcel of the violence inherent in the circulatory system of unfettered capitalism that places power and profit over human lives. For at the heart of the violence in the DRC is the insatiable quest for the plunder of the country’s mineral wealth, which has turned the land into a field of blood.

The DRC is “richer in mineral wealth than any other country in Africa.”²⁷ It accounts for “probably 50 percent of the world’s cobalt reserves, 10 percent of its copper deposits, 30 percent of its diamonds, as well as having an important potential for gold, uranium and manganese.”²⁸ The DRC’s copper reserves are ranked as the seventh largest globally and the world’s third largest producer. It accounts for 70 percent of the global production of cobalt.²⁹ In addition, the country has a rich deposit of the 3Ts (tin, tungsten, and tantalum). These minerals, especially cobalt and copper, are used in the production of lithium-ion batteries for smartphones, computers, and electric vehicles. The global supply chain for these minerals from the DRC is

²⁴ Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (Public Affairs, 2011), 4.

²⁵ Norwegian Refugee Council, “Landless and Displaced: The Struggle for Housing, Land, and Property Rights in Eastern DR Congo,” December 4, 2023, nrc.no/resources/briefing-notes/landless-and-displaced.

²⁶ Elian Peltier, “‘Days of Mass Burial Ahead’ as Congo Mourns Its Dead in Goma,” *The New York Times*, February 5, 2023, [nytimes.com/2025/02/05/world/africa/congo-m23-rwanda-goma-burials.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/05/world/africa/congo-m23-rwanda-goma-burials.html).

²⁷ Robert B. Edgerton, *The Troubled Heart of Africa: A History of the Congo* (St Martin’s Press, 2002), xi.

²⁸ Maria Mazalto, “Governance, Human Rights and Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” in *Mining in Africa: Regulation and Development*, ed. Bonnie Campbell (Pluto Press, 2009), 187.

²⁹ Amnesty International, *Powering Change or Business as Usual? Forced Evictions at Industrial Cobalt and Copper Mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (Amnesty International, 2023), 6.

terribly corrupted and compromised—a hard fact that involves the complicity of nine other African countries, including the DRC’s neighbor Rwanda, through which minerals laundered from the DRC are smuggled into the international market. Multinational mining companies, such as Glencore PLC headquartered in Switzerland and registered in an island in Jersey, have been convicted in the US in criminal cases involving hundreds of thousands of dollars over corruption and securing improper business advantages in mining operations in the DRC.³⁰

In 2019, fourteen Congolese families brought a lawsuit against five big US tech companies—Apple, Dell, Microsoft, Google, and Tesla—over claims of complicity in child labor, injury, and deaths of children who are working in cobalt mines in the companies’ supply chain. Children working in the mines, which have mostly been concessioned to Chinese companies, are paid as little as \$2/day for the backbreaking work of digging for cobalt rocks with primitive tools in dark underground tunnels, without adequate protection. Some children have been killed in tunnel collapses, while others have been severely injured or paralyzed without any compensation from the mining firms. One of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit reported how her young nephew working in an underground tunnel was “buried alive” when the tunnel collapsed. The family was unable to recover his corpse.³¹

Siddharth Kara, a British scholar of modern slavery and human trafficking, notes: “As of 2022, there is no such thing as a clean supply chain of cobalt from the Congo. All cobalt sourced from the DRC is tainted by various degrees of abuse, including slavery, child labor, forced labor, debt bondage, human trafficking, hazardous and toxic working conditions, pathetic wages, injury and death, and incalculable environmental harm.”³² Awareness of the human, social, and environmental impacts of extractivism has not slowed down or significantly altered the operations of mining firms. On the contrary, the surging global demand for industrial-scale cobalt mining continues to result in forced eviction of communities from their homesteads and lands. The prognosis of this ongoing violence is dire because “demand for cobalt is expected to grow by almost 500 percent from 2018 to 2050, and there is no known place on earth to find that amount of cobalt other than the DRC.”³³

³⁰ Amsterdam and Partners LLP, *Blood Minerals: The Laundering of DRC’s 3T Minerals by Rwanda and Private Entities* (Amsterdam and Partners LLP, 2024), 11, 51.

³¹ Emmanuel Ojeifo, “Mineral Extraction, Human Rights Violations, and the Church’s Social Responsibility in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* 6, no. 1 (2025): 31–32, 39–40.

³² Siddharth Kara, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* (St. Martin’s Griffin, 2023), 17.

³³ Kara, *Cobalt Red*, 16.

Currently, in some mining regions, tensions between industrial and artisanal miners over access to mining sites have fuelled violence, displacement, and deaths. In June and July 2019, the DRC's security forces halted the encroachment of artisanal miners in Haut-Katanga and Lualaba provinces, two of the country's largest industrial mining sites, by forcibly evicting them, causing deaths, injuries, and the displacement of more than ten thousand artisanal miners specialized in digging for cobalt and copper.³⁴ Due to the DRC's government mining policy, which "extended industrial mining permits to cover virtually all land where mineral deposits have been found,"³⁵ artisanal miners face exclusion, denial of access to attractive mineral deposits, and lack of economic opportunities.

The international dimension of the mining problem lies in the liberalization of the DRC's economy since the 2000s, which opened the floodgates of international capital and private investments in the country. As of 2021, Glencore PLC owned the largest mining assets in the DRC. Several of the country's largest mines have also been concessioned to Chinese companies (private, public, and state-owned).³⁶ Through the trade concessions given by political leaders to foreign entities for largescale land acquisitions and mineral exploration, the DRC has become the epicenter for the recolonization of Africa that has been underway for some time now. While the actors are changing and their approaches are more subtle than in colonial times, the end is the same. It is "the same old story of colonial exploitation, leaving the continent poor, weak, and dependent."³⁷ It is "a new scramble for Africa."³⁸

Jason K. Stearns, an American political scientist with expertise on the DRC, argues that "the lack of responsible politics is not due to some genetic defects in Congolese DNA, a missing 'virtue gene,' or even something about Congolese culture. Instead, it is deeply rooted in the country's political history."³⁹ As a political entity, the DRC was invented at the dawn of European modernity as the playground of Belgian King Leopold II. "In 1885, during the scramble to divide Africa among colonial powers, King Leopold II of Belgium claimed the country as his personal fiefdom. He set up the Congo Free State, a private enterprise, and during the rubber boom of the 1890s the

³⁴ International Crisis Group, *Mineral Concessions: Avoiding Conflict in DR Congo's Mining Heartland*, Africa Report, no. 290 (International Crisis Group, 2020), 1.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, *Mineral Concessions*, 1.

³⁶ Jason K. Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name: The Unending Conflict in the Congo* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 242.

³⁷ Mariam Mniga, *Recolonizing Africa: An Ethnography of Land Acquisition, Mining, and Resource Control* (Routledge, 2024), 1.

³⁸ Mniga, *Recolonizing Africa*, 1.

³⁹ Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name*, 215.

country became a key source of latex for car and bicycle tires.”⁴⁰ Leopold governed his estate without setting his feet on Congolese soil. As his “lust for land”⁴¹ and resources became insatiable, so did his obsession for annexation of new territories by a stroke of the pen increase.⁴² He appointed officials who wasted no time in conquering the Congo Free State, plundering its resources, and brutalizing its people. Leopold’s men “created a draconian system of forced labor during which they killed or mutilated hundreds of thousands and pushed millions of others to starvation or death from disease.”⁴³ As expected, the revenues from the economic venture were not meant for the development of the Free State but “to be funneled off to Brussels.”⁴⁴ By the time Leopold’s reign of terror ended, the number of dead Congolese numbered between eight and ten million. Commenting on the human decimation, one historian writes that it was “bloodshed on an industrial scale.”⁴⁵ Even when international human rights campaign forced Leopold to hand over the Congo Free State to the Belgian government in 1908, “the Belgians still focused on extracting resources.”⁴⁶

Sadly, this script of violence and plunder continues to play out in the country’s history. Seventy-five years since the formal end of colonial rule, the DRC has not enjoyed real independence, neither are its people prosperous. Postcolonial rulers such as Mobutu Sese Seko and his successor Laurent-Désiré Kabila continued to plunder the country’s resources, terrorize its citizens, and corruptly enrich themselves. As “mimetic reproductions of colonial actors,”⁴⁷ these political actors of the DRC seemed perfectly chosen to play their part in Leopold’s script.⁴⁸ When Mobutu’s 32-year reign ended in 1997, “the Congolese people were worse off . . . than they had been at the end of eighty years of colonialism in 1960.”⁴⁹ If the curious legend that developed decades after Leopold’s death is true, that the monarch had not died but that he had, in fact, come to live in his former colony, Mobutu was the living incarnation of Leopold’s ghost. Today, family

⁴⁰ Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*, 7.

⁴¹ David Van Reybrouck, *Congo: The Epic History of a People* (Ecco, 2015), 59.

⁴² Van Reybrouck, *Congo*, 59–60.

⁴³ Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*, 7.

⁴⁴ Van Reybrouck, *Congo*, 60–61.

⁴⁵ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Mariner Books, 2020), 4.

⁴⁶ Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*, 7.

⁴⁷ Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 12.

⁴⁸ Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu’s Congo* (Perennial, 2002), 308; Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People’s History* (Zed Books, 2007).

⁴⁹ Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, 318.

members and close associates of the current president Felix Tshisekedi, including his wife, sons, brothers, and cousins ('the Tshisekedi Clan'), have been accused of complicity in the illegal extraction, corrupt enrichment, and looting of the country's minerals.⁵⁰

One important factor that has complicated the moral predicament of the DRC's situation is the role of Christianity. The DRC is an overwhelmingly Christian nation. The Pew Research Center reveals that 95.8 percent of the country's population of 101.8 million is Christian. Of the Christian population, half is Roman Catholic, while the other half is Protestant (including evangelical Christians).⁵¹ The DRC has the largest Catholic population in Africa with over 52 million faithful.⁵² This demography makes one wonder what difference the Christian faith makes in the lives of the people. During King Leopold's reign, Belgian Catholic missionaries who came to work in Congo were visibly invisible. Although they built churches, schools, and dispensaries, they did not seem interested in stopping the atrocities being committed by Leopold's men. In one troubling observation, Adam Hochschild narrates how Leopold's soldiers, in their brutal raids throughout the territory, collected orphaned and sickly children and brought them to the missionary sisters to take care of. While many children perished during the long journeys to get to the sisters, even more perished with the sisters because they were too sickly to stay alive. The joy of the sisters—as the mother superior recounted—was the sisters' ability to administer Holy Baptism on the dying children before dispatching them to heaven. Commenting on this distressing account, Katongole notes: "The mother superior does not question why 'several of the little girls were sickly' or why they were orphaned in the first place. That just seems to be the way things are. And within that reality, there was just very little the sisters could do."⁵³

While many Christian leaders in the DRC today are not mere observers in the battlefield of violence and death but are speaking out with prophetic courage against the atrocities being committed by

⁵⁰ "Inside the Congo's Cobalt Scandal: The Tshisekedi Clan, Foreign Cartels, and the Battle for Control." *Kivu Today*, October 11, 2025, kivutoday.com/inside-the-congos-cobalt-scandal-the-tshisekedi-clan-foreign-cartels-and-the-battle-for-control/.

⁵¹ Cited in US Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Democratic Republic of the Congo*, n.d., state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/.

⁵² Hannah Brockhaus, "Pope Francis: Congolese Catholics are 'a Lung' for the Universal Church," *Catholic News Agency*, February 3, 2023, catholicnewsagency.com/news/253541/pope-francis-congolese-catholics-are-a-lung-for-the-universal-church.

⁵³ Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 19.

various actors,⁵⁴ their prophetic denunciation of the tragedies caused by the exploitation of their country's resources and their advocacy for justice, good governance, and equitable resource management have not borne considerable fruits. When Pope Francis visited the DRC in February 2023, he drew global attention to the violence and atrocities going on in the country. He railed against the forces of unfettered capitalism and the idolatry of money that drive the armed violence in the country in order to destabilize it. He issued a prophetic warning to the foreign entities and local agents profiting from the weaponized economy, instability, and death, urging them to listen to the voice of God, repent, and stop getting rich "from resources and money stained with blood."⁵⁵ Francis also spoke against the sexual assault of women and girls that accompanies the resource wars: "Violence against women and mothers is violence against God himself, who from a woman, from a mother, took on our human condition."⁵⁶

Stearns has pointed out that the economy of human and environmental sacrifice flourishes in the DRC because the conflict has become for many "a source of survival and profit."⁵⁷ Many key actors in the system have come to see the hemorrhage as an acceptable byproduct of doing business. This explains the rise and growth of "a new elite of violent entrepreneurs."⁵⁸ Munzihirwa lived through much of the violence in the DRC from colonial to postcolonial times. He came of age when Mobutu reigned over the country. It was in the midst of his struggle for life, freedom, justice, and peace for his people that he was martyred. Can invoking the ideals and values of his life and ministry help to disrupt the oxygen of violence and death that saturate the air in the DRC and in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa today?

MUNZIHIRWA AND THE ETHICS OF ABUNDANT LIFE IN AFRICA

Here, I engage Munzihirwa's legacy and how it might speak to contemporary Christians, most especially in Africa, to renew their yearning for and work towards the realization of abundant life in the continent. This task is not just a theological and pastoral necessity for African Christians; it is also a moral imperative. The focus on Africa

⁵⁴ Rigobert Minani, "The Mining Industry, Conflict, and the Church's Commitment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," in *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining: Integral Peace, Development, and Ecology*, ed. Caesar A. Montevecchio and Gerald F. Powers (Routledge, 2022), 45–53.

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, "Meeting with Victims from the Eastern Part of the Country, Apostolic Nunciature, Kinshasa," February 1, 2023, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/february/documents/20230201-vittimeest-repdem-congo.html.

⁵⁶ Francis, "Meeting with Victims."

⁵⁷ Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name*, 3.

⁵⁸ Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name*, 12.

here does not take away from the immediate social context of Munzihirwa's engagement—that is, the DRC. On the contrary, it amplifies it. The crisis of life in the context of extractivist violence is not confined to the DRC but reflects a broader pattern of political and economic activity in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa with an abundant wealth of mineral resources.⁵⁹ From a theological standpoint, the God of Jesus Christ is not a sadistic God who delights in the ongoing crucifixion and sacrifice of African lives. As Ilo points out, “The African condition today is not the result of an act of God.”⁶⁰ For this reason, the African condition needs to be critically and constructively engaged.

In what follows, I will discuss four points that foreground Munzihirwa's struggle for abundant life and how these might shape the theological, ecclesial, and pastoral praxis of the Catholic Church in Africa. The four points are: 1) theological social diagnostics; 2) the constant of human dignity; 3) the centrality of the cross and resurrection; and 4) the praxis of solidaristic hope.

Theological Social Diagnostics

A careful reading of the edited collection of Munzihirwa's writings, *Our Greatest Weapon Is Love*, reveals a deep philosophical understanding of social history. Munzihirwa had his graduate studies in social sciences, economics, and sociology, and these proved immensely useful in his pastoral ministry. In his social discourses before and after the Rwandan genocide—especially the writings he published in *Zaire-Afrique*, a French-language publication on economy, culture, and society of the Centre d'études pour l'action sociale (CEPAS) in Kinshasa—Munzihirwa displays an intimate grasp of social realities. What is even more interesting is how he brings his understanding of social, political, economic, and cultural life in his country into conversation with Christian faith and theology. For instance, in a series of discourses on development, democracy, and nation-building, he invokes the ideas of several African and Western thinkers, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of their ideas as well as the

⁵⁹ For some important studies on the crisis of extractivism in specific African countries, see Michael Peel, *A Swamp Full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontier* (Tauris, 2011); Greg Campbell, *Blood Diamonds: Tracing the Deadly Paths of the World's Most Precious Stones* (Basic Books, 2004); Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State: Understanding Atrocity in the Sierra Leone Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Lauren Coyle Rosen, *Fires of Gold: Law, Spirit, and Sacrificial Labor in Ghana* (University of California Press, 2020).

⁶⁰ Ilo, *Where Is God*, 10.

distinctive contribution that Christian theology brings to the conversation.⁶¹

One of Munzihirwa's major points of emphasis is the transcendental mooring of Christian commitment to integral development: there can be no authentic development "without a reference to God"⁶² and without "ongoing openness to God's will for individuals, institutions, and societies."⁶³ Munzihirwa took this a notch higher when he distilled the ethical and social commitments that flow from this theological vision as he confronted the humanitarian crisis induced by the Rwandan genocide. Such ethical and social commitments include respect for the dignity and rights of the displaced, acceptance of the demands of human fraternity and solidarity, insistence on non-violent resistance to brutality and oppression, and ecclesial consciousness of the reality of compassionate suffering toward liberation. What emerges from his theological and pastoral approach to social issues is a strong commitment to the hermeneutical insight offered by the Second Vatican Council on the church's "duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4).

Like Munzihirwa, several African Catholic theologians, including Jean-Marc Ela, JNK Mugambi, Emmanuel Katongole, and Stan Chu Ilo—to name but a few—have wrestled with the pertinent issue of discerning God's will for Africa in relation to the quest for authentic development. Concerned about the ubiquity of human suffering in the continent, each one of them, in varied ways, asks about the difference that Christianity and theology in Africa can make in addressing the problems of Africa. What is unique about their approaches to theology is the attention that they bring to critical social analysis in their theological reflections.⁶⁴ By connecting theology to existential concerns, they demonstrate that Christian theology, properly construed, always entails a deep involvement in one's social and political world. As Ela rightly notes, "Any profession of faith is a profession of the God who intervenes in human history as Creator and Savior."⁶⁵

⁶¹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 31–80.

⁶² Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 58–59.

⁶³ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 59–60.

⁶⁴ For some of the key works of the theologians mentioned above, which take history and social analysis seriously in African theological reflection, see Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (Orbis Books, 1986); J.N.K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (East African Educational Publishers, 1995); Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*; and Ilo, *Where Is God?*

⁶⁵ Ela, *African Cry*, 90.

In its aspiration for abundant life in Africa, Christianity in Africa cannot avoid confronting and being horrified at the sufferings and injustices which make far too many Africans to live in conditions unworthy of the human person. This project has to be pursued with a certain impatience and urgency because the poor and suffering who are victims of the dark nights of the soul of Africa cannot keep on waiting. Munzihirwa embodied this impatience and urgency in the way he took up the concerns and struggles of the refugees. His theological and social praxes demonstrate that what Christian social analysis offers us is an angle of vision, a particular way of looking at the world informed by faith in Christ and in his gospel. It is from this vantage point that the church identifies, analyzes, and responds to social problems and conditions.

The Constant of Human Dignity

The first major casualty amidst the outbreak of the Rwandan genocide was the degradation of human dignity. In his account, Katongole notes that as the genocide unfolded, people “watched in silent disbelief as bodies of Rwandan children, women, and men floated in rivers, piled up in churches, and decomposed by the roadside.”⁶⁶ It was not just the speed and efficiency of the killings that baffled people into silence, but also its intimacy: “Neighbors killed neighbors, family members killed family members, priests and religious killed members of their congregations and the other way round. There was very little to say; we could only watch in stunned silence as the brutality and inhumanity of the genocide raised questions about the sacredness of human life and even what it meant to be human.”⁶⁷

In his writings from after the outbreak of the genocide in 1994 until his assassination in 1996, Munzihirwa kept in view the concept of human dignity. This notion appears in his homilies, letters, addresses, and reflections; it was also the key motivation for the pastoral steps he undertook to address the humanitarian fallouts of the genocide. In response to the ill-treatment that the fleeing Rwandan refugees were receiving from the soldiers and other militant gangs operating in Bukavu, Munzihirwa consistently denounced the ideology of violence, calling it “madness” and affirming the sacrifices of those who “do what they can to save lives, even if they are labelled traitors, sometimes suffering the fate of those they helped or tried to save.”⁶⁸ Regarding the humanitarian situation, Munzihirwa was aware that the

⁶⁶ Emmanuel Katongole, *Who Are My People? Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 11.

⁶⁷ Katongole, *Who Are My People?*, 12.

⁶⁸ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 126.

inability of the refugees to return to their homeland was hurting agricultural life in Bukavu because the refugees occupied farmlands in what was already an overpopulated city. He spoke about food shortages, insufficient medical healthcare supplies, overstretched lands not enough to feed people sufficiently, and the potential of a war of the hungry.⁶⁹ He raised an outcry against western countries supplying arms to the Rwandan troops, which was causing more violence and deaths.⁷⁰ Almost a year after the genocide, he revealed that “between five and ten thousand people are assassinated in Rwanda every month” and that “some refugees have continued to arrive here [Bukavu].”⁷¹

Underlying Munzihirwa’s commitment toward the defense and protection of the refugees was his conviction that people do not lose their dignity because of their social conditions. He refers to the refugees as “brothers” and “sisters,”⁷² underscoring the Christian teaching that all human persons are created in God’s image and, on account of this, are brothers and sisters of one another. It is this commitment to the inalienability and inviolability of human dignity that made Munzihirwa raise an outcry against the exploitation, violence, injustice, intimidation, and oppression meted out on the refugees. The height of this commitment is seen when Munzihirwa argues for the right of the refugees to return to their homeland and to live a life of peace, freedom, and prosperity. In the same breadth, he insists that the refugees cannot be forcefully repatriated when the necessary enabling conditions for their safety and security were not in place. To allow this to happen would amount to asking the refugees to sign their death warrant. Thus, even though he warns that “to leave two million Rwandan refugees languishing in Zaire is a crime against humanity,”⁷³ he also makes it clear that the Church in Bukavu “cannot allow them to be treated like cattle at a slaughterhouse.”⁷⁴

A dignity-centered approach to humanitarian issues and to development in general always keeps in view the humanity of each person and of the whole person. Human dignity is a pre-political moral good; it is not given by a legislature or a political executive, neither does it derive its origin from any national constitution. Rather, it is constitutive of what it means to be human, to be created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). The Notre Dame ethicist Clemens Sedmak has noted that “the idea of dignity shapes our perceptions and judgments;

⁶⁹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 143–145, 168.

⁷⁰ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 169, 172.

⁷¹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 142.

⁷² Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 152.

⁷³ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 143.

⁷⁴ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 152.

it also shapes our imagination, our sense of what is possible.”⁷⁵ For Munzihirwa, the theological sense of human dignity was the force that shaped the entire outlook of his pastoral involvement with the refugees and his concern about their plight. As he said in a public lecture he delivered at the University of Bukavu ten days before he was killed, “The peace we wish to promote must come from the recognition that every human being is a child of God, a brother and sister of Christ (Rom 8:29).”⁷⁶

The Centrality of the Cross and Resurrection

As if he had a premonition of things to come, in his pastoral letter for Lent in February 1994, two months before the Rwandan genocide broke out, Munzihirwa wrote: “let us be willing to participate in the trial of Christ.”⁷⁷ That trial eventually came to him, his diocese, and his city in a forceful way, ultimately claiming his life. That the cross was central to Munzihirwa’s struggle is evident from his writings. Again and again, he returns to this theme. In an undated paschal meditation, he asserts that in the struggle and recognition of human dignity in the country “on the way with Christ towards the cross, with Mary, his mother, accompanying her on the way of the cross; we keep vigil at the cross, receiving the last words.”⁷⁸ Further on in the meditation, he writes: “Despite the anguish and suffering, the Christian who is persecuted for the cause of justice finds spiritual peace in his profound and total commitment to God, in accord with the vocation which may lead him to death.”⁷⁹ Munzihirwa envisages that this vocation to death will bear fruit in the repentance and conversion of one’s enemies. For him, martyrdom opens up the possibility of human reconciliation.⁸⁰

If his paschal meditation sounds refined, the condition that produced it was not. Munzihirwa was caught up in the sufferings of the time in an inescapable way. Three months after the formal end of the genocide, he writes: “In these days when we continue to dig mass graves, where misery and disease spread across thousands of kilometers of roads, tracks, trails, hills, refuges, and camps, we are particularly challenged by the cry of Christ on the cross: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!’”⁸¹ In an earlier

⁷⁵ Clemens Sedmak, *Enacting Integral Human Development* (Orbis Books, 2023), 191.

⁷⁶ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 185.

⁷⁷ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 93.

⁷⁸ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 85.

⁷⁹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 88.

⁸⁰ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 88.

⁸¹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 124.

discourse, he offers a profound theological elucidation on death as a vocation to spiritual freedom, human edification, and happiness with God.⁸²

While Munzihirwa places the cross of Christ at the center of his personal, spiritual, and pastoral struggles, demonstrating the cruciform nature of the Christian life, he is also keenly aware that the cross opens up to the reality of the resurrection. He captures the reality of the resurrection with the notion of happiness, which, for him, is the ultimate goal of the human person. He writes: "If, however, death opens the way to a more fulfilling, everlasting life, happiness must be conceived according to an eternal perspective, and socio-political organizations should account for the thirst for the absolute which is at the heart of the human being."⁸³ Munzihirwa sees in Christ's passion and resurrection an incentive for love and solidarity with all people, especially the suffering. He invites Christians to turn to Christ "the living way who guides and enlightens us; by his death and resurrection, he leads us to where he abides with the Father, which is neither a place nor a time, but a presence, the source of all newness. He acts in our life as an ever-renewing inner light, enabling us to live each day with a new heart."⁸⁴

It is important to note that Munzihirwa does not conceive the resurrection as an other-worldly reality that comes at an eschatological future. Instead, he holds death and resurrection in tension as realities that have their grounding in concrete historical experience in this world. Essentially, the fruits of Christ's death and resurrection are not merely gifts that Christians reap in the world to come but vital signs that appear in time. As he stated in his undated paschal meditation, "The peace of the resurrection is the power of the Church during its earthly journey, before it experiences the celestial joy that we can glimpse in hope."⁸⁵ Furthermore, Munzihirwa shows us through his writings whom the crucified body of Christ in his time was: the Hutu refugees fleeing for their life from the furnace of the genocide. He too was called to share intimately in that crucified body on October 29, 1996, when he suffered a violent death. "If we are faithful to him [Christ]," he wrote in 1985, "we can face life and death with hope. From now on, instead of living only to die, we die in order to live. Our existence passes from life to life."⁸⁶

⁸² Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 33–34.

⁸³ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 32.

⁸⁴ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 33.

⁸⁵ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 86.

⁸⁶ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 34.

Praxis of Solidaristic Hope

The notion of “solidaristic hope” emerges in the political theology of the German Catholic thinker Johann Baptist Metz. It is a form of hope that is borne out of identification with concrete human suffering. This hope not only defines the intention and task of Christian theology; it also provides the starting point for any kind of assessment of “the concrete historical-social situation in which subjects find themselves: their experiences, suffering, struggles, and obstacles.”⁸⁷

What does this hope look like for Munzihirwa? In various writings after the genocide and in the midst of the humanitarian crisis, ‘hope’ is one of the few words most frequently invoked by Munzihirwa. An expression of this solidaristic hope can be seen in a 1995 letter that Munzihirwa wrote to the refugees in their camps: “Since we welcomed you, your fate has in a way become our fate. It is the same Christ who suffers in us all. We therefore cannot accept the measures that have been imposed upon you, which violate your human rights, especially your rights as refugees.”⁸⁸ Looking to that year’s Christmas event, Munzihirwa recalls how the incarnation reveals the dynamic of God who in Christ identifies with us and enters into the messiness of our human condition, “in the gash of human history.”⁸⁹ Aware that the hospitality of his own people in Bukavu has been overstretched by the influx of over two million Rwandan refugees, Munzihirwa repeatedly implores his people to not give in to despair, apathy, or hostility but to be a people of hope. “The Church in Bukavu knows that despair often leads to something worse, but hope can stir things back to life, even where there has been only death.”⁹⁰

Through his various actions and strategies to defend and protect the refugees, pray with them, raise international awareness about their plight, denounce the violence, injustice, and evils committed by Rwandan troops, and provide material relief to the suffering people, Munzihirwa shows us that hope is not a *noun* but a *verb* that calls into existence concrete forms of socio-political and pastoral engagement inspired by faith and the praxis of love toward better outcomes. As Ilo notes, “Hope is a daily praxis, not an empty expectation of divine intervention.”⁹¹ This is true of Munzihirwa’s way of life and ministry. He did not just pray and expect things to happen. He actively worked toward the realization of what he prayed for. This understanding of

⁸⁷ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward A Practical Fundamental Theology* (Herder & Herder, 2007), 23.

⁸⁸ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 161.

⁸⁹ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 162.

⁹⁰ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 153.

⁹¹ Ilo, *Where Is God?*, 36.

hope challenges the dominance of an otherworldly eschatology in Christian faith and spirituality today where many Christians outsource their responsibility of working for the betterment of their societies and world to the God who will make all things right in the new world to come. The Cameroonian theologian Elias Kifon Bongmba has criticized the dominant expressions of eschatology in African Christianity, arguing that authentic eschatology that takes a balanced approach to reading the Bible always calls for a transformational praxis in *this* world. “Eschatology is an invitation to maintain an active intersubjective engagement with the other and exude the presence of God in daily life and activity.”⁹²

MUNZIHIRWA, ABUNDANT LIFE, AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Having fleshed out the four key aspects of Munzihirwa’s theological ethics of abundant life in the previous section, in this final part, I relate this ethics to the present context of the DRC, where extractive violence continues to hamper the possibilities of a happy and prosperous life for the country’s citizens. From a theological perspective, the harms caused by extractive violence to environmental and human lives demonstrate that the cross is an ongoing presence in human experience. This issue places the question of human dignity and environmental flourishing, which are foundational to the ethics of abundant life, at the heart of any constructive theological engagement with the DRC’s situation.

While the social context of Munzihirwa’s struggles and advocacy accounts for the strong emphasis on human dignity in his writings, the ecological dimension was not quite as developed. Although in his commentary on the social and material impacts of the humanitarian crisis he highlights the problem of refugee occupation of farmlands, which drastically reduced agricultural productivity and posed serious risks of food shortages and mass starvation, this does not constitute a sufficient articulation of the broader ecological aspects of the situation at the time. The relative absence of this theme in Munzihirwa’s work is understandable. Given the ubiquitous humanitarian crisis occasioned by the refugee situation in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, which he had to respond to with a sense of urgency, Munzihirwa did not have the luxury of time to theorize about broader ecological problems. However, the ecological dimension of abundant life provides a more comprehensive framework for integrating and gauging

⁹² Elias Kifon Bongmba, “Eschatology in Africa: Anticipation and Critical Engagement,” in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (Routledge, 2020), 513.

the presence or absence of various key aspects of authentic development: environmental, political, economic, spiritual, social, and cultural.

Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, the Congolese Franciscan prelate who has served as archbishop of the capital city archdiocese of Kinshasa in the DRC since 2018, has drawn attention to how the vicious cycle of violence due to mineral exploitation obstructs the possibilities of human and environmental flourishing in the country. Speaking at a conference on modern martyrs in Rome, he notes that most modern martyrs in Africa today are victims of the violence that accompanies land and resource extraction. Many Christians, including religious persons and laypeople, have been killed for standing up in defense of their land and environment against extractive forces that degrade and destroy these foundational common goods. While expressing his desire that the blood of the martyrs who have suffered and died in the furnace of extractive violence and resource exploitation in Africa will become seeds of hope for an integral ecology, Cardinal Ambongo tasked the church in Africa to become once again the Good Samaritan that stands beside the marginalized victims of history who have been abandoned by the side of the road. This Samaritanism requires the church not only “to implement adequate environmental education and mechanisms for the participation of local communities in responsible management of environmental heritage” but also to cooperate with “decision-makers at both national and international levels . . . to find solutions to current conflicts and to prevent or address opportunities that may provoke new conflicts.”⁹³ He sounds a theological motivation for this call to action, noting that “the fight for the defense of the poor, the exploited and for the safeguarding of our common home is a fight with God, a fight of God, a fight for man created in the likeness of God, a fight for creation, the work of God.”⁹⁴

Several African theologians working in the area of ecotheology also treat this ecological dimension of abundant life in their works. I

⁹³ Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, “Modern Martyrs, Victims of the Exploitation of Mineral Resources in Africa: Realities and Perspectives of the Outgoing Church,” Presentation at the 60th Anniversary of the Canonization of the Martyrs of Uganda in Rome (October 12, 2024), 4. The text is available, without pagination, at secam.org/cardinal-fridolin-ambongo-the-church-cannot-remain-silent-in-the-face-of-the-illegal-exploitation-of-mineral-resources-in-africa

⁹⁴ Ambongo, “Modern Martyrs,” 2. As current president of SECAM, the continental body of Catholic episcopal conferences in Africa, Cardinal Ambongo joined his global south counterparts from Latin America (CELAM) and Asia (FABC) to sign a document in March 2026 calling for a just transition beyond fossil fuels as a moral and political imperative. See “Manifesto of the Churches of the Global South for Our Common Home,” repositorio.celam.org/files/original/3288/Iglesia_Sur_Global_manifiesto_ENG.pdf.

will briefly highlight the works of two scholars: Ilo and Katongole. Ilo argues that varied manifestations of ecological degradation have turned many African countries into sites of “ugliness.”⁹⁵ His observation reinforces Pope Francis’ critique of human recklessness and abuse, which have made the earth our common home “to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 21). This situation contrasts with the world which God created and saw that it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). To address this problem, Ilo proposes a return to the path of ecotheological aesthetics rooted in the human contemplation of the beauty of God’s creation. This aesthetic view of creation counters the dominant colonialist, capitalist, and extractivist view of creation (evident in the DRC context), which treats the environment not as intrinsically good but in instrumentalist fashion as merely a pile of resources open for human exploitation. While the aesthetic view does not oppose the use of nature’s resources for human well-being, it applies a brake on the myth of unlimited material progress, which is “based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and [which] leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 106). In this regard, the aesthetic view seeks “to regain a sense of awe and sacredness of the earth as our common home, and to be open to the surprises and beauty in all things.”⁹⁶ It promotes a responsible relationship between humans and the environment: we care for the flourishing of the environment so that the environment can care for us in return. Human flourishing and environmental flourishing go together.

Similarly, in his work on African Christian identity, Katongole accentuates the ecological dimension of life in his analysis of ecological violence. He calls for a reinvention of land from which Africans have been uprooted and alienated due to the uncritical embrace of the modern myth of progress that embodies an antagonistic relationship to the land. Drawing key insights from *Laudato Si’* and from the ecological praxis of the Songhai Center in Benin Republic, Katongole invites African Christians to rediscover the deep roots of our identity in the land and to cultivate a harmonious relationship with the land, which “becomes the basis of an integral ecology that is able to fight poverty, protect creation, and restore human dignity to the poor in Africa.”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Stan Chu Ilo, “The Gospel of New Creation: An African Ecotheological Ethics for Human and Cosmic Flourishing,” in *African Ecological Ethics and Spirituality for Cosmic Flourishing: An African Commentary on Laudato Si’*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Cascade Books, 2022), 41.

⁹⁶ Ilo, “The Gospel of New Creation,” 43.

⁹⁷ Katongole, *Who Are My People*, 170.

The absence of this ecological dimension of abundant life in Munzihirwa's writings does not diminish the importance of his theological and pastoral approach to addressing the human and social challenges he faced. In fact, whether we are looking at the crisis of extractivism in the DRC or any other socio-ecological challenges in any country of sub-Saharan Africa today, the four themes that this article develops from Munzihirwa's writings are useful for a constructive theological engagement with any situation or context that compromises the possibility of realizing abundant life. Firstly, we need an integrated analysis of social problems; secondly, the dignity of each person and of the whole person must constantly be kept in view; thirdly, our experiences must be interpreted in the light of Christ's passion and resurrection as well as the suffering and hope of Christ's body in history; and fourthly, we need to embody the hope that embraces solidarity with others in their suffering and to work toward the alleviation of that suffering.

CONCLUSION

The central argument of this essay has been that theological and pastoral thinking about abundant life in Africa challenges African Christian scholars and leaders to confront the ghastly violence that casually continues to sacrifice African lives and the ethical numbness that generates an acceptance of this sacrifice as normal. This should bother African Christians. How is it that a continent that is overwhelmingly Christian should be experiencing the level of violence and deaths that have become associated with Africa? What has happened to the quality of Christian discipleship in Africa? The African continent can only start healing and Africans can only start to flourish and enjoy the fruits of abundant life when our encounter with Jesus Christ transforms us into "a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Munzihirwa understood this imperative of Christian conversion so well and spent a significant part of his life and ministry as a priest and bishop to not only confront the predatory systems, structures, thought, and processes that seem comfortable with the hemorrhage of lives in the DRC, but also to change lives by seeking to change people's ways of thinking and living. In a 1985 discourse on the Christian conception of development, he defined development as "a transformation of attitudes and structures in such a way as to allow individuals and groups to become agents of their nature and destiny."⁹⁸

Munzihirwa did not intentionally set out from his earliest years to follow the path that led to his martyrdom. He was drawn into the

⁹⁸ Munzihirwa, *Our Greatest Weapon*, 31.

ministry and mission of saving lives and defending human dignity and rights as a result of the historical circumstances he found himself. Yet he did not shy from accepting the mission that God gave him despite the obvious risks and dangers along the way. His praxis challenges Christian leaders and peoples in Africa to continue to discern their vocations and respond to God's call to be midwives of abundant life in the continent, wherever the need exists. In addition, African Christian leaders and peoples should be aware that in the performance of the Christian life, there is no pre-written script that Christians can follow to respond to the social predicaments that assail them. The performance of the Christian life as it unfolds daily largely depends on "improvisation."⁹⁹ While the saints and martyrs of our Christian tradition are the best exemplars of improvisation, today's Christians are not called to copy their methods. Rather, each one is called to discern and figure out how God might be inviting us to read and respond to the signs of our own time and our own contexts in the light of the gospel and the Christian tradition, just as Munzihirwa did. **M**

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⁹⁹ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Baker Academic, 2018), 45.