

Catholicism Among the Igbo in the USA in the New Era of Evangelization- Matters

Arising.

By
Rev Fr. Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, C.S.Sp
Department of Theology
University of Notre Dame,
Notre Dame, IN.
Brooklyn, New York, USA
April 25, 2015.
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Sometime last year, I was approached by the executive board of ICUSSA with a proposal to help the association draw up a pastoral plan which would be sent to the USCCB as part requirement for the recognition of ICUSSA by the relevant office of the Bishops Conference in Washington DC. After extensive deliberations we agreed that the project of drawing up a pastoral plan would be more a collective endeavor involving as much of the ICUSSA membership as possible than an individual initiative. It was agreed then that I should make a keynote presentation at this year's ICUSSA convention to start the conversation going as to what should be the focus of this pastoral plan. This paper is my humble attempt to get this discussion going. In my presentation today I will put on several hats. First, I will put on my hat as a historian to help us understand a bit of our history as Ndigbo, who are Roman Catholics and who happen to be living in the USA at this time, and away from our homeland. Secondly, I will put on my theological hat to discuss what I consider as some important theological issues facing our people, our church, and the individual members of our Igbo Church. Finally, I will put on a pastoral hat to see what practical suggestions I can offer as we work through our pastoral plan. I will do all of these in light of the call for New Evangelization which was issued by Pope Benedict XVI and is being carried through by Pope Francis. Therefore, the title of my

presentation is: Catholicism among the Igbo in the USA in the New Era of Evangelization-
Matters Arising.

You will notice right away that I have avoided the term Igbo Catholicism which appears as part of the general theme of this convention. I am rather speaking of Catholicism among the Igbo. Let me try to explain myself right away. It seems to me that the phrase Igbo Catholicism is making an assertion and a claim which is very weighty and hard to prove. For, the phrase is asserting, it seems to me, that there is among the Igbo a distinct way of being Catholic which has clearly definable characteristics and is therefore very different from other ways of living the Catholic faith among the neighbors of the Igbo. While something like this might be in the process of developing now, it seems too premature for me to grant that it has already happened. The Catholic Church among the Igbo is very young- less than 200 years old by all accounts. We have not yet produced our saints and martyrs. We have not produced distinctly homegrown liturgical practices or forms of worship. We are yet to produce theological luminaries who would not only help us to articulate the faith properly but also place our distinct actions of theological exploration on the world map of Christianity in a compelling way. We have not yet even had our own intelligently theological heresies and heretics. We are yet to produce great missionary leaders. We do not yet have faculties of theologies that rival others elsewhere. We have not yet articulated the social justice issues of our day or engaged in battles to eradicate them. For example, nearly two hundred years after our embracing of the faith as Igbo, our societies are still divided into slaves and free, osus and dialas; we are still as socially layered and as status – conscious as ever. In spite of the fact that there are many of us carrying bibles all around, the essence of the biblical message has not yet been taken seriously among us.

Catholicism at its best has everything we need to effect a deep renewal of Igbo society, if we give it the opportunity. The question is whether we really want it or are capable of courageously utilizing the faith to ensure a transformation of our Igbo societies everywhere. More on this later. This is not to say that “we are not trying” they say in Nigeria. Rather, it is to inject a note of caution in our discussions this weekend. On the contrary, as we shall soon see, the Christian faith, including its Catholic variant has made and is continuing to make great strides among the Igbo. The number of Igbo Catholics is growing, our churches are full, Igbo land is home to some of the largest seminaries in the Christian world, Catholic and Protestant. In these regards, the future looks good for the Catholic faith among the Igbo. But the Catholic Church has to work very hard among the Igbo to claim that future by beginning to take care of the situation we find ourselves now. But, let us not get ahead of ourselves in this paper. We will return to the theme of the topic of this paper which is a discussion of the Catholic Church among the Igbo, including the Igbo of the diaspora here in the United States and how the Igbo can grow the faith among them and in what ways this emergent church can make distinct and worthy contributions here, there, and everywhere.

The Igbo

The Igbo are an ethnic group, part of present-day Nigerian nation whose homeland lies between the River Niger and the Cross River. A substantial minority of Igbo also live to the west of the Niger River. Like other groups whose limits are not defined by obvious natural boundaries, the Igbo tend to merge into neighboring peoples.¹ The Igbo are bordered to the West and the North and the South East by neighbors whose histories are closely intertwined with that

¹ Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans: The Genesis of a Relationship – 1906* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), p.17

of theirs. When we consider the Igbo or the Igbo speaking peoples as a whole, in what sense are they to be regarded as a unit? In the first place, they occupy a common territory. Secondly, they speak a common language though with many slight variations. “With a few exceptions these variations appear to be mutually intelligible, without undue difficulty, at least to those who are accustomed to traveling. The language is therefore... a unifying factor”.² Thirdly, the Igbo are also a culturally homogeneous group - with the same or identical kinship structures, religious practices and symbols, exogamic marriage patterns, etc. These make the Igbo a culturally distinct group and provide a unifying factor among them. The Igbo are a very well-traveled people. Even though they occupy the Nigerian hinterland which was for many centuries impenetrable to the outsider, especially from the West, the Igbo have nonetheless for a remarkably long period of time maintained trade links with neighbors to the North (the Igala), to the West (the Edo and the Bini), and to the South of Nigeria. Today, the Igbo are found almost everywhere in the world including here in the United States of America. As they migrate to different parts of the world, the Igbo carry with them their distinct patterns of kinship associations, language, preference for certain foods and, religious and metaphysical outlook. No one knows exactly how many Igbo there are in the world today. Some have put the number of Igbo in the world at about 18% of the population of Nigeria which is itself unreliably estimated to be about 177 million. Other sources argue that the Igbo could number up to 71 million worldwide, if diasporic Igbo or descendants of the Igbo are taken into account. However we look at it, the Igbo constitute a very visible aspect and life of the Nigerian nation.

² See Margaret M. Green, *Igbo Village Affairs: chiefly with Reference to the Village of Umueke Agbaja* (London and Edinburgh: Frank Cass, 1947 and 1964), p.5

Christianity Among the Igbo: the origins

Christianity came to Igbo land in three waves. First to arrive were the CMS, the Church missionary Society of the Anglican Church in England. These came to Onitsha in 1841. They were followed in 1885 by the Holy Ghost fathers, a Roman Catholic missionary/religious community which was founded by a young French noble man, Francois Poullert DesPlaces in Paris in 1703. While the Holy Ghost fathers (Spiritans) engaged in missionary work in Igbo land east of the Niger, and indeed in all of South Eastern Nigeria and beyond, the SMA, the Society of African missions, another French Roman Catholic missionary society began work among the Igbo West of the Niger. Even though they were a later arrival, the work of the Holy Ghost fathers in South East Nigeria spread like wildfire. It is beyond my intention in this paper to engage in any extensive discussion of the mission history of both the Holy Ghost fathers and the SMA among the Igbo. A lot has been written about all of these. What I intend to do here instead is to reflect at some length on the nature of the faith which the missionaries left and how that faith continues to impact us Igbo today as well as how it continues to affect the church both in Nigeria and elsewhere.

In a very perceptive article she published on the Igbo in 1970, Elizabeth Isichei notes that Christianity arrived among the Igbo at a time of great Igbo national anxiety. As Isichei puts it, “the 19th and early 20th centuries were, for the Igbo, an age of anxiety, a time of dislocating economic and social change, of disturbing confrontation with an alien culture, followed either prolonged experience of violent conquest. Very few men considered being Christians who were happily integrated in their own society unless they felt that society to be threatened. This is a

commonplace of mission history, and it is equally true of the Igbo."³ Chinua Achebe has also so richly in *Things Fall Apart* and in his other novels shown how the Igbo felt threatened by European colonization of their territory. In such a situation the Christian religion seemed to many as the safest or rather the best assurance of stability. But, the Igbo did not walk into the Christian churches a tabula rasa. Theirs had been a world suffused with solid beliefs and ideas about life and about reality in general. They had solid beliefs in God, they had their own understanding of the created order which had at least up until then helped them explain reality. They had solid beliefs about the human person. They had kinship patterns and modes of governance which had all served the well and held their various societies together. They had beliefs about the human person and moral codes that helped them to navigate social and personal relationships. All of these as already indicated above gave them a sense of place and of peoplehood. But in the face of the new world that was dawning upon them, much of these seemed inadequate. Therefore, conversion among the Igbo was among other things, a means of identity protection and insertion. Conversion to the white man's religion and to his attendant form of education was, also for the Igbo a new way or means by which they could make sense of the new reality they were now facing and be able to claim part of it.

In the first and early phase of their work in Eastern Nigeria the Holy Ghost Fathers from France in addition to their work of evangelization or rather, as part of it, also provided basic health care to the people. Felix Ekechi records that Father Joseph Lutz, C.S.Sp, the Roman Catholic pioneer missionary to Igbo land east of the Niger, “was able to use European medicine to win the tolerance and even sympathy of the local people. It is said that he devoted much of his time to medical work among the indigenous population. And by ministering to their health

³ Elizabeth Isichei, “Seven Varieties of Ambiguity: Some Patterns of Igbo Response to Christian Missions” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol.3.2 (1970), pp.200-227, at 218.

needs and especially those of their children, many parents who hitherto had been apathetic to missionary propaganda, began increasingly to show a significant change of heart." One apparent effect of Fr. Lutz's medical activity was "surfacing of a pro-Roman Catholic sentiment among the indigenes. Many parents, including even Protestant sympathizers, were said to have now allowed their children to be baptized by the Catholic priests upon receiving medical treatment."⁴ During the second phase of their work, now led by the indomitable Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp, the missionaries turned to education which turned out to be a most winning strategy among the Igbo.

Although the Igbo joined the Christian churches in droves, and even though for many of them Christianity appeared to offer more satisfactory answers and to provide explanatory schemes to life's questions, the Igbo still had many unresolved questions. The first question was about God. The Igbo believed in God but found aspects of the teaching of the pioneer missionaries about God somewhat disconcerting and difficult to accept. The idea for example of the Trinitarian God, the idea of God who was weak to die on the cross, and the idea of a God who was father but had no wife, were all intriguing to the Igbo. The question then and now is this: when the Christian missionaries said "God" to the Igbo what were the Igbo hearing? This phenomenon provides us with the most basic challenge to being a Christian in Igbo land.

God the Problem.

There is a God problem in Igbo Christianity. In an article I published as a young 2nd year seminarian at Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu I put the issue this way: "The missionaries in their bid to plant Christianity drove the gods of the ancients from their Groves. In their places

⁴ Felix K. Ekechi, "The Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria, 1885-1920: Observations on Missionary Strategy", *African Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No.2 (September 1972), pp.217-239, at 221.

they sought to place a God about whom the people were taught little. In Igbo land, for instance, the missionaries merely changed the designation of the Supreme Being without as well changing the content it mediated. Today, people treat the Christian God as if it were Chineke or Chukwu. But the Christian God is in essence neither Chukwu nor Chineke, Abasi or Olorun. Africans now want God to function like any of these deities."⁵ In traditional African consciousness, for example, the gods are mainly conceived to be there to solve human problems and to answer human needs and when they consistently fail to prove themselves powerful, we reserve the right to discard them and seek out new gods. The Igbo are especially culpable of these tendencies.

There are a number of issues which I need to point out here about our attitude to God. First, is the fear factor. Many Igbo worship God out of fear than out of reverence. For them, God is the vengeful other, the unforgiving Shylock who is out to extract the last pound of flesh for any and every perceived wrong. For most of us, God is there to ensure success in our worldly businesses and ventures. God is also there to offer protection from our mortal enemies. Absent from this is the image of a God whose love is universal, the God who is merciful to all sinners. The idea of God who allows his sun to rise and his rain to fall on both the good and the bad was foreign to ancient Igbo cosmology. Elizabeth Isichei opines that perhaps "the most fundamental antithesis between Igbo religion and evangelical and Catholic Christianities they encountered concerned the assumptions about the ends which religion is supposed to serve." Even when the Igbo believed in a future life, through reincarnation, "the whole tenor of prayer and sacrifice was directed towards long life, concrete protection from specific ills, prosperity and so on."⁶ Thus, at issue in Igbo Christianity as a whole since inception was the question of the meaning of salvation. When Christianity preaches that Christ came for salvation, what do the Igbo

⁵ Paulinus Odozor, "Atheism", *Horizons: A Journal of Theology and Religion* vo.1 (1983), pp. 65-78, at 76.

⁶ Elizabeth Isichei, "Seven Varieties of Ambiguity", p.216

understand? What are we saved from? When and how does this happen? Jesus pronounced the poor blessed, the meek happy, and the persecuted worthy of membership in the kingdom of God, but there is among the Igbo a deep desire for prosperity in this world, a yearning for success and of for getting ahead in life. These tendencies are part of the DNA of the Igbo.

Another area of challenge between Christianity and Igbo religion is in the understanding of the human person. Christianity at its best teaches that all human beings are created by God in God's own image and likeness; that all human beings are therefore equally sons and daughters of God, imbued with equal dignity and regard by God. In other words, God does not make counterfeit human beings. Christianity also teaches that because all have sinned before God, all have equally been justified by God thanks to the salvific work of Jesus Christ. Jesus in his death and resurrection has abolished all divisions and made all peoples heirs to the promise of Abraham. This is what Paul the apostle had in mind when in his letter to the Galatians he writes "you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Gal. 3.26-29). In Jesus, we are provided with an angle of vision which helps us look at life differently than anyone else. The sign that Christianity among the Igbo is still tenuous at best is that despite many years of Christianity among us the Igbo society is still among the most stratified anywhere, even though we do not always want to admit it. We are divided along economic lines. We have still some of the most insidious caste systems in the world outside of India. Some are still dialas while others are Osu. Some are still considered "freeborn" while others are "slaves". We still cling to vestiges of the Igbo religion mostly out of fear of reprisals from the deity. I contend that the caste system in Igbo land still

persists not necessarily because all Igbo are callous but largely due to fear of reprisals from the divinity who would extract vengeance from those who crossed bloodlines through intermarriage with those who had been dedicated to their service. There are, of course, those who hold on to this caste systems because they benefit in one way or another from them or because it affords them the chance to look down on other people who are their political and economic or social and educational rivals or even superiors. All this is to buttress what I said above that there is a God problem in Igbo religion, including Igbo Catholicism. Interestingly, this problem is very much well alive and well, even among very sophisticated and well-educated Igbo in the diaspora, including the USA. Let me put the issue in a question form: How many in this audience would allow a relative to marry an Osu? Despite all our exposure to the rhetoric about human rights and racial and human equality how many of us here would even broach this subject among our people at home when we or they are confronted with a choice on this matter?

In his book on the Catholic missions in Igbo land Charles E. Ebelebe, the Spiritan Nigerian missiologist writes of the legacy of the Irish Spiritan missionaries who took over from their French confrères in Nigeria after the arrival of Joseph Shanahan as mission superior in Eastern Nigeria, especially in Igbo land. In Ebelebe's view, the Irish Holy Ghost missionaries brought to Eastern Nigeria what in Ebelebe's words was "Catholicism of the Irish kind". According to him, some of the marks of this kind of Catholicism were that it "was severe and anxious, it is very devotional in character in that it paid great attention to "processions, novenas, mission, benediction, stations of the cross, confraternities, sodalities, devotion to the Sacred Heart and to the immaculate heart, and to Sacrament's such as scapulars, medals, holy pictures."⁷ Ebelebe opines that since no one speaks from nowhere it was to be expected that the Irish would

⁷ Charles E. Ebelebe, *Africa and the New Face of Mission: A critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria* (Langham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), p.xiv.

bring to Nigeria with them their brand of Catholicism. "All the devotional spiritual practices mentioned above are popular in Igbo land; so are the sacraments and the sacramentals. The Igbo, of course, have added their own local genius to many of these, sometimes approaching them from the perspective of the traditional religion... I fear that this type of Catholicism is not connected with the Igbo and their depth. The emphasis is much on externals and on activities."⁸

There is much that is true in Ebelebe's assertion here although I do not see the kind of Catholicism he describes in the negative manner he portrays it. I think one thing about the Catholicism that he describes here is that it pays very little attention to what has become known as the social question. That is to say, it paid little or no attention to issues of justice and to the sinful social structures such as the ones I have described above. As one commentator puts it this was a kind of faith which would sanction a slave-owner for maltreating an individual slave while failing to see anything wrong with the institution of slavery itself. The emphasis was on the individual and his or her personal salvation. This kind of Christianity was incapable of transforming social structures or of interrogating them. On the other hand, the sacramental/sacrament emphasizing Christianity built on what was already there sometimes for good and at other times with undesirable results. For example, the sacraments are an acknowledgement of the presence and the nearness of God to his people. In them and through them God continues to show his love and to manifest his salvific intent towards his people. The Igbo were always conscious of the presence of God in their lives. The sacraments of the Christian church reinforced this belief in the nearness of God to God's creatures. However, without adequate catechesis in the idea of God which these sacraments and sacramentals mediated they could become magical objects with powers and possibilities for saving and protecting. The craze today for holy oils and sometimes for other objects like that can sometimes

⁸ Charles E. Ebelebe, *Africa and the New Face of Mission*, p.37

be indicative of this kind of situation where these sacramental are other names for the charms and amulets of African traditional religion.

There is however, another aspect to the term “Catholicism of the Irish” kind which Ebelebe leaves out in his analysis even though his book is precisely on this issue- mission. Catholicism of the Irish kind was also a missionary Catholicism. The Irish church proved itself over the centuries a very missionary Church, for whatever reason and however one looks at it. Many countries of Africa and in the Americas, including the United States, benefited from the Irish missionary spirit and push. As Pope Francis reminds us, “the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion.”⁹ In this New era of evangelization, mission and evangelization are two aspects of the same coin, so to speak

Part II

Some important tasks of the New Evangelization

I want to highlight a number of critical elements/tasks which we must attend to as we seek to construct a pastoral plan for the Igbo communities here and everywhere else in this New Evangelization. The first is that we must introduce Jesus to Christians again and through him to introduce them to the one Jesus calls Father. After nearly two hundred years of evangelization among the Igbo there are a number of questions which we must sincerely put to ourselves: How well do we know Jesus, individually and as a community of faith? How well do we understand him? I dare say very little. The question goes even further: how well do we know the one Jesus calls Father – God himself and what correlation has this knowledge to the way we order our lives

⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no.28

in this world? How can the Christian Church get Christians to share their knowledge of Jesus with their neighbors and the world around them? How do we inspire Christians to find creative ways to bring their knowledge of and friendship with Jesus to bear on the way they organize their lives and the world around them? As I see it, the new evangelization for us in this part of the world involves a theological task, an anthropological task, a moral task, and a catechetical/pastoral task, broadly speaking.

(a) The theological task

As I have already indicated above, the most important task of the new evangelization is to introduce Jesus to Christians again and invite them to share their knowledge borne out of this new intimacy with their friends and neighbors. In the first of his two volume work, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI argues that the goal of Christianity is neither world progress nor universal prosperity. In other words, it is not part of Jesus' message to usher in an earthly kingdom of prosperity and harmonious co-existence. What then did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity and a better world? Pope Benedict asks:

What has he brought? The answer is fairly simply, God. He has brought God. He has brought the God who formerly unveiled his countenance gradually first, to Abraham, then to Moses and the prophets, and then in the wisdom the teacher – the God who reveals his face barely in Israel even though he was also honored among the pagans in various shadowy guises. It is this God, the God Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the true God, whom he has brought to the nations of the earth. He has brought God, and now we know his face, now we can call upon him. Now we know the path that we human beings have to take in this world. Jesus has brought God and with God the truth about.... origin and destiny: faith, hope and love...¹⁰

In an earlier book, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger had argued that to understand the biblical belief in God one must follow its historical developments from its origin with the

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.44

patriarchs of Israel right up to the last books of the New Testament.¹¹ Ratzinger examines the Exodus story [Exodus 3] in which Moses encountered God in the burning bush. He considers this text as central for the understanding of God in the Old Testament. The aim of the text is clearly to establish the name Yahweh as the definitive name of God in Israel and to give it meaning.¹² The theological significance of the name Yahweh consists in the differentiation of Yahweh as the God of Israel's fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is revealed to be God of human beings not just of a locale as some of the more ancient names of God in Israel imply.

“He is not the god of a place but the god of men: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is therefore not bound to one spot but is present and powerful whenever man is. In this fashion one arrives at a completely different way of thinking about God. God is seen on the plane of I and you, not on the plane of the spatial... He is nowhere in particular; he is to be found at any place where man is and where man lets himself be found by him.”¹³

Therefore, an essential characteristic of the biblical God is that he is personal. God by his name is personal. This implies not only that we can experience God beyond all other experience but also that he can express and communicate himself.¹⁴ In Jesus Christ God has become quite concrete and even more mysterious. God is always infinitely greater than all our concepts and on our images and names. “The fact that we now acknowledge him to be triune does not mean that we have meanwhile learned everything about him....”¹⁵ Even so, the fact is that this God now has shown us his face in Jesus Christ (Jn 14:9) -- a face that Moses was not allowed to see (ex. 33:20).¹⁶

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, translated by J.R. Foster (Ignatius Press, Communion Books: San Francisco, 1990, 2004), p.116

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p.117

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p.123

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p.23

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p.25

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p.22

According to Pope Benedict XVI, in bringing the gift of the God of Israel to the nations Jesus has brought the gift of universality so that through him all the nations “recognize Israel's Scripture as his word, the word of the living God.” This was the one gift which God had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. “This universality, this faith in the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – extended now in Jesus’ new family and all nations over the bonds of descent according to the flesh – is the fruit of Jesus’ work. It is what proves him to be the Messiah. It signals a new integration of messianic promise that is based on Moses and the prophets, but also opens them up in a completely new way.”¹⁷ The vehicle of Jesus’ universalism is the new family “whose only admission requirement is communion with Jesus, communion in God’s will” (cf. Mk 3:34ff). This universalization of Israel's faith and hope and the concomitant liberation from the letter of the law for the new communion with Jesus is tied to Jesus’ authority and his claim to Sonship. It loses its historical weight and its whole foundation if Jesus is interpreted merely as a liberal reform Rabbi.”¹⁸

Before we all get worked up and defensive here, we must note that Pope Benedict’s position does not say that peoples everywhere, including our cultures, have no idea of God or of his presence in human history. Catholic tradition at its best has always acknowledged Gods’ presence and revelation in human societies everywhere. In fact Pope Benedict himself in his homily at the opening mass of the 2nd African synod on October 4, 2009 said as much when he stated that “the absolute Lordship of God is one of the salient and unifying features of the African culture. Naturally in Africa there are many different cultures, but they all seem to be in agreement on this point: God is the Creator and the source of life.” In this regard the pope refers to Africa as “the repository of an inestimable treasure for the whole world.” What he is inviting us to do and something very

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.116-117

¹⁸ Benedict, XV, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p.119

much necessary for our work here is to pay attention to the unique features of Jesus' revelation about God. The God of Jesus is new in every culture, including our own, and what we believe about him has important implications concerning the way we live our lives here and the way we organize society. As I have argued elsewhere, "what African Christians need is not the African concept of God. What African Christians need is a clear picture of the Christian view of God."¹⁹ And yet, this is what is often lacking in much of African theological discourse. It is not often clear what difference belief in God, who has manifested himself in Jesus Christ and who continues to abide with his Church would make to Christian life in Africa. It is not just enough to enumerate the attributes of God. African Christianity has also to draw the lessons from scripture and from the Christian tradition on God. What, for example, is the ethical import of the doctrine of the trinity for Africa? What lessons are there for Africa in the God which Jesus Christ taught about in the parables? Consider for example the rich and as yet untapped lessons which lie hidden in such great parables as the story of the prodigal son/prodigal father, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Consider the moral motivations which are implicit about the God who like the poor widow gives everything she has to recover a lost coin, the God who lets his sun shine on every one, the good, the bad, and the terribly unlovable. What lesson is there for an Igbo Catholicism which draws on Jesus' saying in John 3: 16 and many other such passages? How would the praxis of Jesus as regards women and the marginalized of society in his day affect the construal of relationships in Igbo land and indeed throughout Christian Africa? What warrant would the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness, personal and communal provide for the ethics of forgiveness among the Igbo and the rest of Africans?"²⁰ The God of Jesus is as yet unknown. Every renewal of church life and mission must begin with revisiting Jesus' God. To the extent

¹⁹ James Henry Owino Kombo, *The Doctrine of God in African Christian Thought*, p.12

²⁰ See Paulinus Odozor, C.S.Sp., *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological and Theological Considerations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), p.

that we are able to get closer to the image and understanding of the one Jesus called his Father, to that extent will be able to live right and do right in this world.

We Christians believe that the God who made heaven and earth has not retired to himself in splendid isolation leaving the world to its device. God has continued to journey with us. The fourth Eucharistic prayer puts it very eloquently when it asserts that even when we sinned and lost his friendship God did not abandon us to the power of death but continued to help us all to seek and to find him. As Joseph Sittler also points out, “all Christian speech begins with what God does and gives.” What God does, is that he goes out of Himself “in creative and redemptive action” towards human beings.²¹ What God gives is himself, first through his creative and benevolent acts, but finally and most definitively through the Incarnation in Jesus Christ. As the Evangelists point out in their stories of the birth of Jesus, “Everything seems to stand still and all things are bathed in luminous light when the new deed of God occurs in Jesus Christ.”²² The stunning deed of God in Jesus is therefore not only the revelation of God in creation, but ultimately his self-disclosure in Christ. This is an engendering deed in that it calls to being lives marked by “its originative character.”²³ Our people need to hear this message clearly and loudly in this new era of evangelization. In other words, the first project of the new era of evangelization would start with us painting again for ourselves, for our people, and for the world at large a loving portrait of Jesus and through him to get to the very nature and heart of God. It is no longer sufficient to claim that our people know God. Indeed that is not in doubt. The Christian church must again in all seriousness take the people back to the God of Jesus Christ the one who so loved the world that he sent his son for our salvation. What this entails is a proper catechesis which initiates the people of God into the mysteries of the faith.

²¹ Joseph Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.25.

²² Joseph Sittler, *The structure of Christian Ethics*, p.29

²³ Joseph Sittler, *The structure of Christian Ethics*, p.25

(b) The anthropological task

Jesus does not only reveal the true nature of God. He also reveals to us the fullness, the nature and meaning of the human person. In his post synodal exhortation, *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XI states that Africa is facing “an anthropological crisis”.²⁴ Some of the causes and symptoms of this impoverishment and diminishment of the human person among are poverty, wars, violence, conflicts racist xenophobia, segregation and division of peoples into classes and castes, and the denial of human rights in various forms. All these still play a large role in the world of human relations in many parts of the continent including our own. Many people are running around the continent with hurtful and negative memories of wrongs which have supposedly been done to them or to their ancestors. African societies, including those in Nigeria sometimes appear to be sitting on a keg of gunpowder which is ready to explode at the slightest provocation. As the pope points out, in the new era of evangelization, “Africa will have to rediscover and promote a concept of the person and his or her relationship with reality that is the fruit of a profound spiritual renewal.”²⁵ Christian tradition in general and Catholic theology in particular has profound insights which constitute the only real basis for such a renewal.

First of all, anthropological renewal among the Igbo and in Nigeria must start with the central Judeo-Christian truth which insists that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. Creation in the *imago Dei* has anthropological implications far too many to be recounted here. But let us note a few of these. It means that every person has an intrinsic worth which is his or hers despite all other odds. Every person is essentially equal, equally a son or a daughter of God. Human worth is not something conferred by any government or by any society

²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*....., no. 11

²⁵ AM 11

or by any individual on a person. Human worth is not taken away either by a person's social or economic standing, history, or even moral standing. Every human being is equally loved by God. As the second Vatican council puts it, "the human person is the one creature God willed for himself." This statement applies to everyone, everywhere. As Pope John Paul II points out in his very first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, "the God of creation is as well the God of redemption."²⁶ In his work of redemption, Christ reveals to us the full meaning of the human person. For "in the Redemption man becomes newly expressed and in a way, newly created. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The point here is that in Christ and through Christ the human person "has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own dignity and of the meaning of his existence."²⁷

As Pope John Paul puts it in this encyclical, "for the Church all ways lead to man." Thus, the church cannot abandon man. For, the destiny of each and every human person, each man and each woman in every age and place, that is to say, "his election, calling, birth and death, salvation or perdition, is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ."²⁸ Therefore, a central concern of the Church in Nigeria and among the Igbo in the new era of evangelization must be the defense of the human person everywhere. Whatever attacks the dignity of anyone anywhere attacks the dignity of us all and must be our concern whether that person be from our village or not, whether that person be a Christian or not, whether that person be from our part of the country or from another region or ethnic group; whether that person is a believer or not. In this regard human rights must be a centerpiece of our moral crusade in the next while. We must

²⁶ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, in the *Encyclicals of John Paul II*, edited with introductions by J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1996), no.9, p.58

²⁷ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Miller, ed. no.11, p.60.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, Miller, ed., no.14, p.66.

insist on everyone's space to act for himself or herself and give everyone the right to seek redress when his or her rights are trampled upon. Igbo Christians must set themselves a target to uphold all cultural practices which enhance and reinforce human worth and dignity. By the same token we must also rise up and challenge boldly and seek to change all cultural practices which dehumanize people such as practices which are demeaning to women, the various caste systems in Igboland and in various parts of the country; and various other the systemic issues which challenge or are at variance with the Christian belief in the dignity of the human person. For such a program to be successful we must immediately initiate processes of dialogue at various levels between Christianity and African traditions with a view to identifying those aspects of our culture and tradition which go against the deep Christian belief in the equality and sanctity of all human beings. Such a dialogue is long overdue and must be an essential aspect of the new evangelization. Cultures and traditions as human creations can contain both the noble and sinful. Thus they must be evaluated constantly in light of the gospel.

(c) The moral task

For many people the Christian moral life is simply about do's and don'ts – a situation which often leads to a kind of moral brinkmanship – how far can I go before I fall off the cliff? Christian life must be understood as friendship with God. Doing so changes everything. For the Christian, morality is not a dictate given by a master to servant or by a slave owner to a slave. When Jesus says, “I do not call you servants anymore... I call you friends” (Jn 15:15) this is what he means. “The servant master relationship has little room for the intimacy of friends. Jesus treats them like friends by disclosing who he is and where he is going. Jesus tells them that he is laying down his

life for his friends; that is not what a master would do for his slaves."²⁹ Christian morality is therefore a response ethic. It is a response to the stupendous love of a friend; it is an invitation to give back in love to a friend who has shared so much with us. It is never an imposition.

If in the new era of evangelization we seek to uphold Christian morality, we must do a number of things. We must seek to foster a community made up of individuals who care about others, people who live justly. Education in virtue is essential for a morally upright Christian community. The Church must continue to make its voice heard on those moral issues which we know from our faith and through human reason to be wrong. Abortion is always wrong, no matter who does it or for what reason; marriage is always an arrangement between a man and a woman. No amount of popular pressure can change any of these. However, while we teach these truths, the church in Igbo land and in rest of Nigeria must also act pastorally to help stem those situations which force women into prostitution or to get pregnant when they do not want to or can afford to do so. We have a pastoral responsibility to act with government and other agencies to find solutions to the youth problem among us. We cannot sit on the sidelines on these issues.

(d) The pastoral/catechetical task

It should be obvious from all that we have said so far that the path to the realization of the goals of the new evangelization lies in catechesis. As Pope Benedict notes in his post-synodal exhortation on Africa, “the contribution of Christians will be decisive if their understanding of the faith shapes their understanding of the world. For that to happen, education in the faith is indispensable. Lest Christ become just one more name to adorn our theories.”³⁰ We must

²⁹ William Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, p.45

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no.32.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus_en.html.

therefore find a way to retell the Christian story in a coherent manner to our young people who are bombarded today with so many voices and tendencies from the media and from other sources that are very much in opposition to what we stand for. The aim would be to present to them a healthy alternative that comes from the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One thing we must no longer do is present Christian morality as merely a set of prohibitions or just as a set of joyless options. Our teachings on sex and sexuality, for example, can sometimes appear oppressive to people of this generation in part because we have not taken time or find ways to put them in the theological and anthropological setting which animates them in the first place and gives them meaning. It often appears to some people, including our young as a set of impossible prohibitions fashioned by a set of people who are totally joyless and are bent on taking away human freedom and happiness. This is far from the truth. The good news is simply that: good news. Christians must hear it again as a message of joy and deliverance. In this regard one important challenge in the new evangelization is to convince Christians themselves that they have something which is supremely valuable, something the world really needs. It is often hard enough to bring Christians to believe they are unique. How can one give what one does not have or propagate what one does not believe in?

III

Towards A Pastoral Plan

To end my presentation, I want to offer a few practical suggestions which would help us put into practical terms some of the issues dear to our hearts and central to our existence as a Christian community. The first task of any pastoral plan is to get the people to come to know and love Jesus, the Son of God and the savior of the world. Who are we? What makes us unique as Christians? The question perhaps is not just who but whose are we, to whom do we belong? The New Era of Evangelization must force this question open. It must also help us answer it. To what are we committed? "Paul's sense of identity was radically changed when Christ broke into his life on the road to Damascus – an encounter which so radically altered Paul's life that he would now account everything else he was and owned as loss, "for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Phil. 3: 5-6). Christ grasped Paul and "Paul strives to grasp Christ by entering into the center of experience of Christ, sharing his sufferings and knowing the power of his resurrection. That is why he forgets what lies behind and strives like a runner to cross the finish line." (Phil 3:12-14). Being a Christian means that something has happened to us, something has been given to us; that something is Christ. That "something" makes us a new creation, a new people, with a new identity. Christian identity is forged by the Holy Spirit who brings us all together in the first place through baptism. Born again of water and the Holy Spirit the community is nourished continuously by the word of God and at the table of the Eucharist. The practice of the Eucharist in turn has moral dimensions to it. "When understood against the stories of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners and outcasts, sharing food blessed and broken in

Jesus's name, is itself a socially significant action.”³¹ In this era of the new evangelization we cannot fail to draw out and to insist on some of the ethical implications of being a Eucharistic community as well as the ethical implications of the various rituals and symbols of faith which are part of our community as Catholic Christians. For one thing, a people through whose veins run the same blood of Jesus cannot continue to be so divided and so divisive. A people who share one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one hope must also be a people of common purpose, united in heart and mind, bound together in love. In this new era of evangelization, we must by our lives and actions show the world that the waters of baptism are indeed thicker than the blood of ethnicity in Nigeria and in all of Africa. Nothing short of this would do. In fact to continue to do otherwise would be to betray Christ, to rob his mission of its inherent power to manifest the love of God for all humanity. This is the height of immorality, indeed it would be the ultimate sin.

The one reason God entered into our history through Christ is to show mercy. God sends Christ, Christ sends his church. The church is on mission to bring people back to God. The Church carries on the mission of Christ, the mission of God in three ways- proclamation of the word (preaching, mission, direct evangelization) which is meant to bring people to come to share the good news or to confirm the faith of those already in the church; through works of charity, individual or communal and through the celebration of the sacraments – baptism, penance, marriage, holy orders, the Eucharist, confirmation and anointing of the sick. The sacraments in particular witness to God’s continuous love and intention to save. In them and through God, the Church causes the love of God to be manifest in the human community.

³¹ William Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, p.14

There is among the Pentecostals a great disdain for the sacraments. It is as if Jesus had not commanded his church to forgive sins in his name or say that unless we eat of the flesh of the son of man and drink of his blood we would not have life in us. It is as if he had not commanded us to celebrate the Eucharist in his memory. What there is among the Pentecostals and the Evangelicals a selective emphasis on the word of God which is meant to induce a false happiness in the people. Many of our Catholics who came here or are still left in Nigeria are drawn to this false and incomplete form of Christianity and are made to be disdainful of the sacraments. There must be a place in our pastoral plan for a complete reeducation in the sacraments. How this can be done would depend on the various groups in their various regions. Another sad aspect to our lives as Igbo and Nigerian Catholics in the United States is that many of our marriages are in trouble here. Many of our marriages have failed, will fail or are in danger of failing. The statistics of failed Catholic marriages among the Igbo is disproportionately high when compared to the situation in Nigeria. Any pastoral plan we come up with must study this reality and come up with practical suggestions as to how to help our people face up to the challenges which Christian marriages in this part are faced with. We can no longer be silent on this front. In other words, a through catechetical plan for a return to the sacraments, especially of penance, Eucharist and marriage, is very necessary.

Youth catechetics is absolutely important if Catholicism would stay alive among the diasporic Igbo in the USA. There has been a lot of effort on the part of Igbo Catholics in the United States to establish Igbo Catholic communities all across the country. This is very commendable. Permit me to say that sometimes the reasons need to be made more Christian. Many among us see these communities as primarily for imparting Igbo language and culture to the next generation. There is nothing wrong with imparting Igbo culture and language to our

youth. In fact it is commendable. The problem is that this must not be the sole or even the primary aim of these communities. The primary aim in these communities would be to retain and to impart the faith to our people, using, among other things, the Igbo language. How do we do this? This is a major question for the pastoral plan we seek to draw up. We must also emphasize adult catechesis in whatever way we can throughout the various regions and communities. In this regard we must seek out and engage some of our priests as chaplains. The issue of chaplains can be a delicate matter. Whatever we do, we should be careful to employ or invite in our midst as chaplains only priests in good standing with their bishops or religious communities and whose love for the church and what the church teaches is assured and proven.

The Igbo catholic community in the USA must be a missionary community both to themselves here and to the Church in Igbo land and in Nigeria. Sometimes, the Church in our community in Nigeria has been raked with clannishness or divisions and scandals of one kind or the other. What do we do here? Do we fan the flames of division from here or do we play the enlightened role of bringing people together as sons and daughters of the one father, members of the one body of Christ? The community of Christ is a moral community which believes that there is a moral consequence to what we believe in and about Christ. In this regard, Catholicism among the Igbo in the United States must be an inclusive faith, truly catholic in nature. One gets the impression sometimes that some Igbo Catholics in this country prefer to live and worship alone and apart from their other Nigerian Catholic compatriots. It is as if we are into an ecclesiastical apartheid. I know this is not the intention. I know that we like to provide our children with a situation where they can learn their faith also in its Igbo variant and language. Perhaps our pastoral plan can find a creative way to not only achieve this aim among the Igbo but help our other Nigerian non-Igbo brethren to do the same in a spirit of fraternal co-existence.

I have no ready answers as to how this could be done. But I am sure we can find answers to this issue s if we remember that, as the Lord himself said, to who much is given much is expected. If diasporic Nigerian Catholics can find a way to manage their particularities while honoring the common bonds that tie them together as daughters and sons who have the same God, share the same faith and are initiated into the one body of Christ by a common baptism, a people in and through whose veins runs the same blood, the blood of Christ, that would be a witness to the faith of inestimable value.

Christian life is therefore a life of discipleship; a life of people who take seriously what Jesus takes seriously. And what does Jesus take seriously? Jesus took God seriously, so seriously in fact that his whole purpose in life was to do the will of his Father, even to the point of death. Jesus took human beings seriously, so seriously that he saw in every human being, a daughter, or a son of God, equally loved by God, equally worthy of his love. He died that all might have life. He died in service of all. For him there are no wasted or discardable or counterfeit materials. All human beings have worth. All human beings bear the divine imprint. All human beings are in need of God. Jesus took reconciliation seriously. His one intention was to reconcile all humanity with themselves and to God. Jesus took people seriously, especially the poor and the most vulnerable. He did everything he could to give them a sense of belonging and to alleviate their plight. He so identifies with them that he tells his disciples that the final determination as to whether they would have a place with him or not in the kingdom will depend on how well they have related to the poor: “I was hungry, you gave me food, I was naked you clothed me, I was sick and in prison you visited me.” Human beings at their most vulnerable constitute the litmus test of all Christian morality and of any attempt to uphold a moral standard that is Christian. Go and do likewise. In the end it is all about love. Jesus says, as I have loved you, you too must love

one another. I do not mean the wishy-washy feeling which often characterizes our relationships. I mean that human solidarity which takes the other seriously as a child of God, in every way possible.