NEW EVANGELIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH IN IGBoland

Prospects and Challenges

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By
Francis Anekwe Oborji
Professor of Missiology
Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome

I begin by thanking the President and his Executive Board of the Association of Igbo Clergy, Religious and Seminarians in Rome, for inviting me to speak to you this day on the missiological theme of the “New Evangelization.” When the President, Fr. Peter Okolo met me for this talk, he specifically asked for a paper on the “New Evangelization.” However, upon reflection, I thought of contextualizing it to our local Church in Igboland, Nigeria.

John Baur, the author of the celebrated 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, notes that Nigeria is the giant among the African states and it also has the largest Christian population. According to Baur and rightly too, the eastern region is decidedly Christian with a Catholic Igbo predominance (Baur 1994: 381). The Ohanaeze Ndi-Igbo (the Igbo Apex Cultural Organization), pegs the population of Ndi-Igbo at 50 million. Yet nothing is more disputed in Nigeria than the various public population counts, so often falsified for religious and political purposes as well as for getting higher quotas of the federal budget. Again, in Nigeria, a multi-ethnic and religious pluralistic society, to be an Igbo is almost synonymous with being a Christian. The growth of Christianity among the Igbo is manifest in the teeming number of their lay faithful that populate the various Christian Churches in Igboland and other parts of Nigeria, and indeed, in many other countries where the Igbo live today. The vibrant Igbo Christianity is also seen by the way their sons and daughters embrace vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life are promoted primarily by Christians living model lives in following Christ (Pastores Dabo Vobis 38).

In a recent work, David Asonye Ihenacho notes that the Catholic Church in Igboland is undoubtedly a veritable miracle of contemporary Christian evangelization. That a nation, which hardly knew anything about Christianity barely a century ago could so overwhelmingly convert to it only a little more than a century later is indeed a spectacle miracle that deserves far greater worldwide attention and appreciation than it is getting today (Ihenacho 2004 vol. 1: xi). The pace of the growth as well as the maturity of the Igbo Church at all levels is unique in the history of Christian evangelization. Igboland is indeed a place that should naturally inspire confidence in religion as humanity progresses deeper into the new century.

But some Igbo scholars make a caution in the light of the present euphoria that is being lavished on the phenomenal growth of Catholicism in Igboland. Igbo Catholics need to be creative enough to explore the numerous prospects that are confronting their local Church and society today so as to consolidate, reinforce and invigorate Catholicism in the present-day Igbo world. For example, the paradoxes of double affiliation, the Osu caste scandal, tribalism, waning discipline of Church leaders, under-use of the laity in the Church, the challenges brought by vocations boom and inculturation as well as the eruption of charismatic and evangelical spirituality, and the upsurge of the healing Churches. For Catholicism to be meaningful and rewarding, it must confront the difficult realities of the local Church and be able to offer reasonable solutions to them. It should also be able to make best out of the abundant resources and prospects of Igbo Catholicism. This implies that the meaning of the new evangelization needs a contextualized interpretation in the Igbo society. In this paper, we shall approach the topic from three perspectives: 1) Basic issues 2) New Evangelization in the Igbo context; 3) Challenges and prospects.
1. Basic Issues

The basic issue is on the relationship between mission and evangelization, and of the necessity of mission ad gentes in the modern world? It is the issue of how to define mission in relation to the new understanding of local Churches and of the role of missionaries as well as the insights gained from Pope Paul VI use of the term evangelization in the apostolic exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN). The term New Evangelization was developed in this context of safeguarding the missionary activity ad gentes and of the development in mission fields, especially as sparked by the reality expressed in the working documents of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM), as could be seen in their various meetings in Medlin (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992). In the Nigerian context, the term came to us as a “New Era of Evangelization” and was first used by John Paul II during his pastoral visit to the country in 1982.

The Vatican II missionary Decree Ad Gentes (AG) defines mission in the following terms: “Missions is the term usually given to those undertakings by which the heralds of the Gospel are sent by the Church and go forth into the whole world to carry out the task of preaching and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ ... The special purpose of this missionary activity is evangelization and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where she has not yet taken root” (AG 6). The conciliar decree adds that “all over the world indigenous particular Churches ought to grow from seed of the word of God, Churches which would be adequately organized and would possess their own proper strength and maturity. With their own hierarchy and faithful, and sufficiently endowed with means adapted to the full Christian life, they should contribute to the good of the whole Church” (AG 6). It is within this definition and purpose of mission that the Council presents a broader meaning of the term “evangelization”: “Evangelization is that activity through which, in obedience to Christ’s command and moved by the grace and love of the Holy Spirit, the Church makes itself fully present to all persons and peoples in order to lead them to faith, freedom and peace of Christ by example of its life and teaching, and also by the sacraments and other means of grace” (AG 5). The conciliar missionary decree presents the evangelizing initiatives in territories dependent on the Roman Dicastery, and speaks of them as either places where Christ has not yet been announced or where the Church is not sufficiently established. The decree adds: these “are generally called “missions” (AG 6).

However, after the publication of Paul VI apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Nuntiandi, the post-conciliar mission theology initiated a new debate on the concept of mission which led to the so called crisis of the post-conciliar missiology. The debate here is on the relationship between the term mission and that of evangelization. Some missiologists began to question the use of the term “mission”, and in its place preferred the use of the word “evangelization. Some authors misinterpreted Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN) to have suggested the use of the term evangelization over and above that of mission. Evangelization (“missio ad gentes” or “first proclamation”), according to these authors, exists everywhere, because in every Church there are people to be evangelized. Thus, the missio ad extra may mean that one has to go outside one’s own frontiers to go to other Churches with the spirit of dialogue and inculturation. But one must avoid speaking of the missio ad gentes. Again, it is within this camp that we find those authors who do not like to use any longer, the terms “mission, missiology”, but rather would speak mainly of “six-continents”, World Christianity, Cross-Cultural Communication (Oborji 2005: 32)

This school of thought believes that today the seed of the Gospel has been sown in nearly all over the world and Churches have been established and are developing everywhere. And that in the Churches of the North Atlantic, there is a noticeable phenomenon of lack of vitality: they need, or they will need, missionaries sent by young Churches from the global South. They also raise some spontaneous questions: why should one leave and set out for a distant “mission ad gentes” when in one’s own territory, though it was Christian, there is so much need and so many real mission lands?

This school of thought has continued to influence the understanding of mission in the works of some authors. The attacks brought very devastating confusion on the traditional meaning of the
term mission in general, and on the expression *missio ad gentes*, in particular. Precisely for this reason, John Paul II, in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, has to devote much of its chapters discussing and trying to safeguard the term from the negative interpretations. John Paul II defines mission within the three concrete situations in which the Church’s evangelizing activities are carried out in the modern world. Today, the mission of the Church is pursued in a complex and changing reality. Faced with this picture, the Church carries out its various activities which are directed towards three concrete situations: a) mission *ad gentes*, b) pastoral activity, and c) re-evangelization or new evangelization.

*a) The mission ad gentes*: This term when properly used is the mission of the Church directed to “peoples, groups, and socio-cultural contexts in which Christ and his Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature” (RMi 34). Mission *ad gentes* is the effort of evangelization directed to peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ, who are far from Christ, in whom the Church has not yet taken root, and whose culture has not yet been influenced by the Gospel. For John Paul II, the mission of the Church is one; it is the same as Christ’s and the Spirit’s. However, it has its own specific activities to make it distinctive and particularize it. One of these specific activities is *missio ad gentes*. This aspect of the Church’s mission is special and specific. Therefore, *missio ad gentes* must be safeguarded. It cannot be compromised. John Paul II does not accept that the word “evangelization” should replace “mission” (RMi 34). In fact, the term “mission” must be kept. It has biblical and theological foundations and its own richness too.

*b) Pastoral activity*: This is the evangelization effort of the Church in those areas or Christian communities where adequate and solid structures exist. It is giving of pastoral attention to the cultures and the practicing Christians who live in areas that have already been evangelized or are still in the process of deepening the faith just received (RMi 33).

c) *Re-evangelization or new evangelization*: This is a new terminology introduced and popularized by John Paul II himself. It is a new direction in the Church’s evangelizing efforts aimed at addressing the emerging situations in the field of evangelization, directed to those “groups of the baptized who have lost a living sense of the faith ... and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. The situation that calls for a new evangelization is particularly found in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well” (RMi 33).

The encyclical cites examples of where the new evangelization is most needed: the rapid and profound transformation which characterizes today’s world: urbanization and the massive growth of cities, especially where demographic pressure is greatest, where human problems are often aggravated by feeling of anonymity experienced by masses of people; to the immigrants from various religious backgrounds; the refugees; and also to the situations of poverty which is today on an intolerable scale (RMi 37).

Another situation that calls for the new evangelization, is what the pope describes as *cultural sectors*, the modern equivalents of the *Areopagus*: The “world of communications, ... commitment to peace, the development and liberation of peoples, the rights of minorities, the advancement of women and children and safeguarding the created world ... the immense “Areopagus” of culture, scientific research and international relations, with all the vast opportunities as well as challenges they offer to mission (RMi 37-38).

Therefore, the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* insists that the old categories related to *missio agentes* are still useful and should be retained: “Care must be taken to avoid the risk of putting very different situations on the same level and of reducing, or eliminating, the Church’s mission and missionaries’ *ad gentes* (RMi 32). Mission *ad gentes* is not a threat to religious freedom “which remains the premise and guarantee of all freedom ... because the Church proposes; she imposes nothing” (RMi 39). The encyclical accepts that there is only one mission: “This mission is one and undivided, having one origin and one final purpose ... the Church’s one mission”
However, within the one mission of the Church, there are different tasks and kinds of activity (RMi 31). The reason for that diversity is not intrinsic to mission, but it depends on the circumstances within which the same mission is exercised (RMi 33). Thus, at present, there are three major situations which require a different approach to mission.

Among the three situations, the first and most important is *missio ad gentes*. Its importance and its priority are derived from its object: the non-Christians. These are the people in the world who are most in need of the mission of the Church in order to be enlightened in a credible and intelligible manner as to God’s plan, and the way that plan has been carried out in Christ, and to be offered the chance to hear it and embrace it. These people “have the right to hear” this Good News” (RMi 44). In fact, the Church, cannot withdraw from her permanent mission of bringing the Gospel to the multitudes - the millions and millions of men and women, who as yet do not know Christ, the redeemer of humanity (RMi 44). It is therefore necessary to ensure that this specifically missionary work that Jesus entrusted and still entrusts each day to the Church, does not become an indistinguishable part of the overall mission of the whole people of God and as a result become neglected and forgotten (RMi 34).

In defining the term “new evangelization”, the Latin American bishops at the Santo Domingo Conference (1992), employed the principle of deduction. For the bishops, the starting point for the new evangelization is the assurance that Christ holds “unfathomable riches” (Ephesians 3:8) that no age or culture exhausts and to which we human beings can ever turn to be enriched. To speak of a new evangelization is to acknowledge that an old one or first one has already taken place. It would be incorrect to speak of a new evangelization of tribes or peoples who never received the Gospel. To speak of a new evangelization does not mean that the previous one was invalid, sterile, or short-lived. Rather, it means that today Christians face new challenges and new questions that urgently require a response. To speak of a new evangelization does not mean proposing a new gospel different from the first. There is only one Gospel, but it can shed new light on those new problems. The expression “new evangelization” does not mean re-evangelizing. The point is not to act as though there were no first evangelization but, rather, to start from many rich values it has left in place and proceed to complement them by correcting previous shortcomings. The new evangelization has emerged as a response to the problems plaguing a society where a divorce between faith and life leads to situations of injustice, social inequality, and violence that cry out. It means taking up the magnificent endeavor of energizing the Christian community (Santo Domingo Conclusions no.24, ed. A.T. Hennely 1993:81-82).

Thus, the new evangelization is defined as a new realm of vitality, a new Pentecost in which the acceptance of the Holy Spirit will give rise to a renewed people made up of free human beings conscious of their dignity and able to forge a truly human history. It is the combination of means, activities, and attitudes that can put the gospel into active dialogue with modernity and with the postmodern, in order to challenge them and to be challenged by them. It is likewise the effort to inculturate the gospel into the emerging cultures of our present world.

**Dynamisms of the New Evangelization**

John Paul II mentions three dynamisms that should accompany the missionary activity of the new evangelization. The new evangelization must be *new in zeal* (fervor or ardor), *new in methods* and *new in expression*.

*a) Evangelization that is new in zeal*: For John Paul II, evangelization is new in its zeal only, if in the measure in which it is carried out, it renews and brings us always closer and in fellowship with Christ, the first evangelizer. The new evangelization begins with conversion of the heart. It invites believers to rediscover once more that the Christian vocation is the call to *holiness of life*. It is sin that draws back the ardor of evangelization (RMi 23; Gigliioni 1996: 170-173).

*b) Evangelization that is new in methods*: The new evangelization should also be new in its *methods*. *New in method* is an invitation to every member of the Church to become a protagonist of
the diffusion of the message of Christ. Evangelization is the duty of all members of the Church. Also, evangelization should be today new in its methods for the simple reason that it ought to meet the challenges of the new realities in which the Gospel proclamation is addressed (RMi 2.37).

c) Evangelization that is new in expression: Lastly, for John Paul II, evangelization should be new in its expression. The evangelization that is new in its expression is that which strengthens the vitality of the ecclesial community. In other words, evangelization is new in expression when it strengthens and accompanies the growth and maturity of the faithful in their consciousness of the truth and treasure which they have in Christ. This includes also, the Christians’ awareness of being bearers of the truth which saves, and which, from the beginning of the Church, has been decisive in stimulating the missionary commitment. Thus, the primary condition of evangelization is the promotion of that which strengthens the missionary commitment of the ecclesial community. “New in its expression” means forming mature Christian communities from which the faith emits and realizes all its original meaning and adhesion to Christ and his Gospel (CHL 34; Giglioni 1996: 176-178).

Thus, the debate on the relationship between mission and evangelization has achieved one simple fact: It has made visible the new phase in the Church’s missionary and pastoral commitments in the contemporary world. Again, missionary activity in its relation to the new evangelization, refers to the call for the renewal of the evangelizing activity of the Church in our modern world. It is an awareness of the missionary commitment that awaits the Church in diverse cultural contexts and in every territory of the globe. The dynamism for the realization of this commitment has been expressed in the three terms of an evangelization that is new in zeal, new in method and new in expression.

2. New Evangelization in the context of the Church in Igboland

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the missionary activity of the new evangelization addresses primarily the problem created by the process of de-Christianization and secularism that is sweeping those nations of the Western Europe and North America with ancient Christian roots. However, some aspects of the reality that the new evangelization addresses could be found also in the young Churches, such as ours in Igboland. So, how do we speak of the new evangelization in the context of the Igbo local Church? The answer to this question is to be found in the address of John Paul II to the Church in Nigeria in 1982 when he made his first pastoral visit to the country. In the Nigerian context, the pope spoke of a new era of evangelization. He used the expressions new era of evangelization and new zeal for evangelization interchangeably. In other words, it was during this visit that the pope inaugurated the new era of evangelization for the Church in Nigeria. There are several ways to understand the meaning of the new evangelization in the Igbo context:

1) In the context of the Igbo local Church: The new evangelization means a new phase of evangelization that is now at the hands of the local clergy, religious and laity. This means energizing the Church in Igboland with the dynamism of the new evangelization. It is the era of the local Church in intensifying its evangelizing activity and responding to the new challenges in the missionary field (John Paul II: Address to the Nigerian Bishops Lagos 15 February 1982: AAS 74(1982) 611-618).

2) In the context of the Igbo local Church: The new evangelization is an era of deepening the faith of the Catholics. After the first pastoral visit of John Paul II in Nigeria in 1982, the Nigerian hierarchy organized a seminar to examine avenues of facing the challenge of deepening the faith in the country. The seminar which was held in Ibadan in 1984 had as its theme: “Evangelization in Nigeria” (Oborji 1992: 3). What was discovered at the seminar was that Nigeria after a hundred years of Christianity is not the same again. That in spite of the positive stride made in the evangelization of the country, many of our Catholics have fallen, some neither cold nor warm. Archbishop Albert K. Obiefuna calls it in one of his pastoral letters: “Idolatry in a Century old
Faith” (Obiefuna 1985). Furthermore, it was discovered that the Church we are living now is not the future Church our children may likely meet in the coming century. So, there was a call to initiate concrete programs that could contribute to the building of the future Church in the present.

In their joint pastoral letter to mark the centenary celebration of Catholicism in the region (entitled: *Put out into deep water*), the Bishops of Eastern Nigeria said:

To whom much is given of him much is expected. We give thanks to God for the rich harvest. However, we must not rest in the assumption that the faith has been solidly established. Indeed there are evident signs that our people have received Christianity but have still shallow faith. (Bishops of Eastern Nigeria, *Put Out into Deep Water* (First Centenary Celebrations, Onitsha, 1985, p.11).

Thus, for the Igbo Bishops, the new evangelization is a call for deepening the faith through intense catechisis, building up Christian families; and overcoming the menace of exaggerated ethnicity and religious bigotry in the Nigerian Church and nation (it is a call for inter-ethnic and religious dialogue). This is in line with the teaching of John Paul II in the post-synodal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. For the pope, in Africa, “the new evangelization will thus aim at building up the Church as *family*, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups, favoring solidarity and sharing of personnel and resources among particular Churches, without undue ethnic consideration” (*Ecclesia in Africa* 63). The new evangelization also invites Catholics to develop spirit of openness and sincere dialogue with members of other ecclesial communities; and a commitment to dialogue with all Muslims of good will (*Ecclesia in Africa* 65-66).

3) *In the context of the Igbo local Church*: The new evangelization is that which begins with *holiness of life*. It is an evangelization that springs from the spiritual renewal of the faithful. As Bishop Anthony Nwedo puts it in his homily at the centenary celebration in 1985: “As we rejoice at our Centenary celebrations … we should think seriously of the legacy we too are going to bequeath to our future generations. To be worth-while it should be principally spiritual, a legacy of strong faith, and a legacy of devout Christian families in a Christian country whose sons and daughters are aglow with apostolic zeal born of the love of God and their neighbour” (Nwedo 1985: 12-13).

4) *In the context of the Igbo local Church*: The new evangelization is an era of missionary formation and animation; of placing in the conscience of every baptized the missionary dimension of our Christian vocation. Every Christian, by virtue of his or her baptism is called to be an evangelizer. The local Church has the responsibility of not only awakening in the conscience of the clergy and faithful this fundamental truth about our faith in Christ, but also of forming or rather training them in the dynamics of the new evangelization. The Igbo Church has been blessed with vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Many Igbo priests (diocesans) have begun to participate in large number in the *Fidei donum* program. And many Igbo religious men and women are today engaged in mission *ad extra* both within and outside the country and the African continent. Again, since Igbo people in general, are great travelers and traders who carry their religion everywhere they go, the new evangelization means developing in the Igbo Church a catechesis of missionary animation and formation in the religious instruction of the people at various levels. This means establishing well equipped Catechetical and Pastoral Centers in Igbo dioceses with an on-going program that should go beyond the actual practice of the annual seminars for the working parish catechists. Even the catechists themselves need the missionary formation and animation. The same is true to our seminaries and houses of formation which should include missiology as a key course in their curriculum of studies.
3. Challenges and Prospects: The Role of Igbo clergy and religious

So far, we have shown that in the Igbo context, new evangelization is a recognition of the maturity already attained by the local Church: It is a call towards initiating a missionary activity for the bequeathing of a Christian country to future generations. Therefore, in our context, new evangelization is the gradual growth of a local Church from mission to Christian land. The new evangelization aims at building up Igboland and indeed the whole Nigeria as a Christian land, an adult Church. It is an era of telling our own story of not only what others have done to evangelize us but also of what our forefathers have done and what we are doing for the Christian mission in our land and beyond. What are the challenges and prospects for achieving this goal? And what are the roles of Igbo clergy and religious?

In order to adequately respond to the above questions, I wish to propose here, the models of St. Augustine of Hippo and of St Benedict, the Abbot, for the spiritual renewal and the rebirth of the Igbo Church and society. After the fall of the Roman Empire and during the early establishment of the Christian religion in that empire, people needed new vision for the emerging Christian society. Augustine responded to this with his City of God and other writings. The City of God provided the guidelines for the political organization of the emerging Christian community and showed how the governments of Christian territories should work for the well being of all citizens and protect them from anything that might take them off the path of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Christ. Again, the City of God developed a model of mission via monasticism; a completely different approach to mission was emerging that depended on modeling and persuasion and not by force. From the fifth century to the twelfth, Augustine’s monastic model was to inspire two main strains of monastic movement, the Celtic and the Benedictine. Benedict the Abbot, in particular, developed a set of rules that made the monastery not only a place of prayer and but also of agricultural and industrial revolutions for the people of Europe. In addition, the monastery became the center of culture and civilization as well as of mission. In the midst of a world ruled by the love of self, the monastic communities were a visible sign and preliminary realization of a world ruled by the love of God. They were the places where the City of God could best be seen and experienced.

In the African context, modern historians have argued that the triumph of the Ethiopian Church in the midst of the Muslim onslaught in north and the horn of Africa, especially between 640 and 1270, is largely as a result of the religious reform introduced by the two great monastic figures of that Church: St. Takla Haymanot (12-1313) and Ewostatewos (Eustatius) (1273-1352). Before the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Church of Ethiopia was a faithful daughter of the Coptic Church of St Athanasius of Alexandria (328-367). The Ethiopian Church was a dependent Church in almost all aspects of Church life on the Coptic, including sending candidates for bishopric to the Patriarch of Alexandria to receive their Episcopal ordinations. However, when the Arabs conquered North Africa in 640, they took control of the trade route along the Red Sea – the Ethiopia’s life line with the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the outside world. Thus started the age-long isolation of the Ethiopian Church. Soon it was even dangerous to go to Alexandria and to look for a new Abun (bishop); so the country was often left without a bishop and for along periods. Even the Solomonic dynasty of Aksum eventually lost its power to the invading tribe until the restoration of this throne in 1270 (which has survived up to the reign of the late Emperor Haile Selassie).

Three factors worked together towards the triumph of Christianity in Ethiopia: the restoration of the Solomonic Kingdom, the reform of monasticism and the Ethiopian cultural renaissance. In a special way, the religious reform through the two strains of the Ethiopian monasticism (though not spared of some serious theological disputes), shared greatly in the religious revival of the country and the rebirth of the modern Ethiopia. It began with the evangelization of the provinces at the grassroots and the introduction of Christian marriage. The crowning activity of the monks was the production for the edification of the faithful of a rich literature, in which legends of saints played a leading role. Since then till our day, the Church of Ethiopia has been enjoying the status of a sister church (and no longer a daughter church of
Alexandria), since it is a self-sufficient church in all respects. Some have argued that this experience created the problem of syncretism in the Ethiopian Church, but modern authors like to call this process the indigenization of Christianity (Baur 1994: 38-39).

The Church of Alexandria on its own side, survived the Muslim conquest of Egypt, largely because of its deep monastic spirituality which was started by St. Anthony, the Abbot of that Church. Moreover, on the other part of North Africa, the Church of Carthage (the Maghreb), did not survive the Arab conquest, mainly because of theological controversies (which the Alexandrian Church also had its full cup), and also because it never looked towards the sub-Saharan Africa, but towards the other side of the Mediterranean world. Again, unlike the Church of Alexandria, which was fully an inculcated Church both in liturgy and spirituality as well as in its Patriarchate institutions and structures, the Church of Carthage was more of a Church of the elites and metropolis and cared less of evangelizing the rural and interior areas.

Recently, a Cameroonian theologian, Kä Mana has proposed a model of reconstruction of Africa based on the theology of resurrection and salvation in Christ. He appeals to the model of the Egyptian mythology of Isis and Osiris – their struggles for life and rebuilding of existence, and of the model of the life-death-resurrection of Christ event. From these two distinct backgrounds, Kä Mana proposes a new society that passes from political ethics to Christological ethics and politics. The Christians of today are called to articulate in public domain, Jesus Christ as the horizon of our existence or as he before whom one is to reconstruct the humanity. The theology of reconstruction comes with the challenge of what to do between the place of the logic of market economy and the logic of love as manifested by Christ. In this regard, the reconstruction of Africa must begin with the principles of structuring of our social consciousness: The dictatorships of the belly, of alienation and powerlessness, are the arena from which the struggle for the future must begin. What is at stake, is changing these realities and introducing a new way of thinking, to promote an “Africa” which is responsible for its own destiny. It is neither optimism nor pessimism but a desire for hope in the building of a new society (Mana 2004: 21).

In his own theology of reconstruction, Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, the frontline Igbo theologian, presents the boldness of the renewed Christian community as a way for the conversion of the whole society. He bases his model on the concordia theology of Cyprian of Carthage: the establishment of the community for the Kingdom of God through the witness of the faithful, especially by creating humane relational channels that make up the one Church of Christ. In such a community, rank and privilege disappear; primitive sentiments of ethnocentrism or tribalism, religious bigotry do not determine the appointment of political leaders both in the civil and ecclesiastical sectors. It is the conversion of both the Church and the civil leadership: to look with horror on the current reign of corruption and indiscipline in the public and private lives of the entire society; to fully put into practice that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female” because all “are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). For Uzukwu, this model will realize the Master’s beautiful, humane injunction of love, through which the one Church of Jesus Christ is recognized all over the world (Uzukwu 1996: 152-153).

Therefore, in the spirit of the new evangelization, spiritual renewal should be paramount in the pastoral concerns of the Church in Igboland. The foundation for ushering in this dimension of the new evangelization could be through educating the people (as the early missionaries did), and imbuing them with the knowledge for self-confidence that could inspire in them the needed desire for spiritual growth, agricultural and industrial revolutions in Igboland. Inspired by the above theory, I wish to make the following proposals for the rebirth of Igbo Church and society, and indeed the African continent:

1) By working towards greater self-sufficiency: It is obvious, that a Church cannot be said to have attained the desired adulthood not until it reaches a certain level of self-sufficiency in matters of personnel, the basic ecclesiastical structures and institutions, and is able to cater for its own financial needs without unnecessary dependence on the outside. The Igboland is still a mission land not so much because it lacks pastoral workers, but primarily because of the infantry faith of the
local people, and more importantly because of its financial dependence on the outside. Without the financial assistance from the outside, the Church in Igboland will just fold up. Seminaries, convents or houses of formation, Church hospitals, and so on, will stop functioning. Though our people still give generously to the Church out of their poverty, there is still need to think of viable means of achieving self-sufficiency in the Igbo Church.

Self-sufficiency in financial matters would help to give stability to Igbo clergy and religious. Presently, most dioceses and local religious institutes have no stable social security for their clergy and members of the consecrated life. This situation has made some to have wrong perception of the priesthood and to interpret the missionary zeal of some clergy and religious both at home and abroad as something borne out of lust for money. It has also forced members of the consecrated life of our local religious institutes who have given their life for the work of evangelization to accept any kind of menial job for their members, especially in foreign land just to make enough money to run the congregation at home. Most of our priests are today working in sub-human conditions in some parts of Europe and North America just for the same reason caused by lack of structures of social and financial securities in their home dioceses. The anti-immigration policy of the Western governments has caused the local Churches of these countries to alter the traditional concept of the missionary for the African priests and religious working in Europe and North America. Foreign Priests and religious working in Africa as missionaries are accepted and respected for what they are. But the African priests and religious working in the local Churches in the West are often not seen as missionaries but as Italians would say: extra comunitaria (clandestine immigrants or strangers outside the fold). The anti-evangelical terms have even been adopted by some Episcopal Conferences of Europe in their decrees concerning foreign priests and religious working in the West. African priests and religious working in the West are often perceived there as money mongers and not as missionaries. This stereotype and misconception of the heroic missionary endeavors of the Africans will continue not until there is a certain level of self-sufficiency in the local Churches of Africa.

Moreover, in a bid to get money through local support, some parishes in Igboland have been pushed into introducing various forms of fees which the lay faithful are expected to pay. Some of these fees have to be paid sometimes, as a condition for the reception of sacraments (e.g., penance, holy communion, marriage, etc.). In some parishes, bereaved families are denied Eucharistic celebration at the funeral of their loved one who may not have paid the registration fee for the statutory organizations (e.g., Catholic Men Organization, Catholic Women Organization, etc). In some parishes, families pay exorbitant fee in order to bury their dead members in the Church cemetery. Most of these are the regular experiences of those who live outside their native community and who from time to time may need these Church services in their ancestral homes. It is not uncommon nowadays for some to accuse their parish priest of embezzlement of Church money in order to further his studies in Overseas or to lend a helping hand to members of his family. All this happens because our priests and religious in Africa have no stable social security.

The new evangelization is about making the Church in Igboland and the Nigerian society self-sufficient. The Church in Igboland is poor because the Igbo and indeed the Nigerian people, generally speaking, are poor. So to come out from its poverty situation, the Church needs a program that could inspire the civil and the ecclesiastical authorities to begin working towards raising the living condition of the people and empowering them through job creation and good governance (Oborji 2006: 62). Parishes could think of initiating self-help projects and of mobilizing the people for practical agriculture and industrial revolution in the model of St. Benedict. The Church could do this in the same style it used in championing education in Igboland during the colonial era. The Igbo are blessed with fertile land and the political leaders of the First Republic were able to develop a program of agricultural revolution which has being lost since the discovery of petroleum in Nigeria. As a result many Igbo today, depend on food items that are produced from the Northern part of the country. The Church may need to encourage the lay faithful to organize themselves for large scale
farming and cooperative industrial projects – in the form of the traditional Igbo system of cooperative and social development unions.

2) By encouraging human promotion: The new era of evangelization has two main facets, namely, dialogue with the people and their culture as well as traditional religion; and dialogue with the socio-political and economic situations of the people. In the latter, special attention is given to the poor. The rapid changes in the modern world caused largely by the advancement in technology and new economic systems, and coupled with the Nigerian factor of instability of government, religious and ethnic politics, among others, have left an average Igbo person almost confused in the society. In the traditional society and before the rise of the rule of the generals in Nigeria, there was a close family and clan interdependence as well as a degree of community of ownership. This tradition helped to protect the individual and smaller group against extreme need as long as the group had something to share. The missionaries when they arrived in 1885 appreciated this tradition, and it was the tradition that helped the Igbo to survive the trauma of the Nigerian – Biafra Civil War (1967-1970). There are still traces of this tradition in the present Igbo society, especially as seen in the patterns of cooperative development or improvement unions through which many Igbo communities have been able to raise funds for common projects such as building the parish Church, secondary schools, hospitals, etc. This Igbo tradition must not be allowed to die. Since Igbo have decided for Christianity, the Church has a great responsibility to help Igbo recapture and preserve this culture in Christ.

In the past, the Igbo were not known as beggars. But today the situation of wretchedness of the society is gradually turning the people into street beggars and of engaging in all kinds of unwarranted behaviour and human deceit just to make money. This situation has forced many of them to live in conditions, sometimes below that of an animal. That is, conditions caused by their lack of the basic needs of life in various degrees and their being unable to cater for themselves. It suffices also to note that Igbo youth are not spared of the experiences being told of most Africans at the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea since the Western countries new anti-immigration laws came into force. The coasts of the Western countries have been turned into grave yards for the immigrating young Africans and the Asians. Luke Mbefo describes this situation as a new form of slavery and servitude: For an African without sufficient skill and qualification to decide to abandon his fatherland in pursuit of low-grade jobs in Europe or America in the hope of cheap money would amount to a new form of enslavement, a “slavery in reverse gear.” It is an enslavement that is now freely chosen rather than willingly imposed (Mbefo 1996: viii-ix). Stephen Ezeanya speaks of Christ suffering terribly today in his African members because of their crushing poverty situation (Ezeanya 1992: 10).

Again, who knows how many Igbo youths and adults are living as illegal immigrants in many foreign nations – and the concomitant hardship and human degradation that accompanies such social status in a foreign land? What of our young ladies? True, Igbo culture is very protective of women dignity and shuns any form of anti-social behaviour in sexual relationship. The modern Igbo society is still very conscious of this and our Catholic heritage is helping a lot in preserving this golden side of our tradition. It is a tradition that could serve as a great anti-dote to the spread of the HIV/AIDS deadly disease and the modern culture of commercial sex. However, the poverty situation of our people is not helping the matter. Many of our young people have become victims of this virus largely because of their living conditions and not necessarily as a result of sexual promiscuity which is not part of the culture of our people. Though some Igbo dioceses are already doing something to address this issue, to help alleviate the suffering of the people. For instance, many dioceses have established the Caritas and Justice and Peace offices in the diocesan chanceries. All with the aim of assisting the poor, the sick, the aged and of promoting the dignity of the marginalised in the society. All that is now needed is a well articulated program that could empower the people to take their destiny in their own hands.

3) By encouraging culture of documentation: One of the major factors which have brought about the rather inferior position of Africa and black race in general in the present world scenario is
the poverty of documentation of our history especially of the remote past. And as Archbishop John Onaiyekan notes: While the Mesopotamians have left behind libraries of cuneiform tablets and Egyptians have their collections of hieroglyphics, much of sub-Saharan Africa has largely oral tradition. The result is that the rest of the world and even we ourselves tend to feel that nothing happened in our continent until others discovered us. This has an incalculable negative impact on our image, as well as on our ability to take our rightful place among the peoples of the world of today. It is in this regard that someone remarked that every old man who dies in Africa is like a library burnt down. This situation cannot be allowed to continue (Ogunu 2005:xx).

Moreover, the history of Christianity in many parts of Africa is still almost dependent on the works and records of the foreign historians and missionaries. Such works were more on what the others have done and are doing for Africa. In other words, new shift in academic trends in writing about African Christianity is to emerge with the call for the new evangelization.

4) **By encouraging indigenous theological reflections:** The Igbo Church is one of the few in Africa that has produced the highest number of well trained and educated clergy and religious, experts in different fields of theology and other ecclesiastical studies. Yet the Church in Igboland has little or nothing to show in the area of inculturated theology. As was remarked once: There is too much education of our clergy but very little scholarship. The Christian faith is still almost mystified for the local people. In other words, the Christian faith is still hanging on the air for many of our Christians – who want their local pastors, theologians and religious to help make the faith reach them and bring it to the grassroots level through scholarship (research and writing) so that Christ and his salvific message could be incarnated fully in Igboland.

Thus, the new evangelization challenges us to observe that the phenomenal growth of the Catholic Church in Igboland in numbers and structures has not produced theological reflection and critical activities that are usually associated with such Church growth. Theological reflection helps to build a new language for a local Church in the areas of liturgy, catechism, and various aspects of theology and Church life. The Igbo Church needs a theological faculty in its territory for this to happen. The Igbo Church needs well equipped and functioning Catholic publishing houses, printing press, and regularly published ecclesiastical journals, periodicals, and newspapers of high quality. Above all, the local theologians themselves need to form a professional association and cooperate among themselves for exchange of information and expert advice to the local Church in pastoral initiatives and creative programs.

5) **By encouraging the indigenous initiatives of the lay faithful:** Ironically, the few indigenous initiatives keeping the Igbo Church dynamic and buoyant today seem to have originated among the lay people. Igbo Catholicism is thriving on lay initiatives. The Church authorities and theologians need to give the needed leadership that could inspire more of lay initiatives in the Church. One only needs to attend some local Eucharistic celebrations to see the great initiatives the Igbo Catholic laity is bringing to bear on Igbo Catholicism. Through them such indigenous quasi-theological projects as the biblical movements, charismatic renewal activities, pious organizations, laity volunteer actions, indigenous liturgical hymn compositions, liturgical musical instrumentation, etc., have taken roots in Igbo Catholicism. Most of the magnificent churches, parish halls, schools, hospitals, etc. that are found in Igboland today were built through the financial contribution and leadership of the lay faithful. Unfortunately, while this is happening from the side of the laity, the Igbo clergy, religious and theologians, on their own part, are yet to reciprocate the dynamism of their lay counterparts. The Igbo Church still lacks a great leadership along the lines of indigenous theological reflection and development in Igbo Catholicism. The ideal thing should be, while lay Igbo Catholics provide the dynamism and enthusiasm, the clergy and religious as well as other theological experts should complement their efforts by providing the necessary reflection to guide such lay-inspired enthusiasm and dynamism. This means that the pastoral zeal of the Igbo clergy and religious must be matched with indigenous theological reflection and creative leadership.
4. Conclusion

The Igbo people have a myth of their origins in which is impeded the myth of their resurrection as a people. This myth is typified in the ritual initiation of *Eze Nri* and by the ritual reproduction of *Eri*, the ideal human, the founder of the Igbo race (whom historians have traced his lineage to the biblical Patriarch of the founder of the nation of Israel ((Genesis 46:16; Numbers 26:16). The *Eze Nri* myth is about the victory of life over the forces of death and evil. This is very strongly expressed in the address of the presiding priest when the candidate for *Eze Nri* is about to be buried in a shallow grave, as part of the life-death ritual initiation:

> You who are about to enter the grave, rise up again with a vivid shining body. May no sickness or harm befall you: Rise up as previous eze (king) Ndri have done. Rule your people with truth and justice. Go to Aguleri, obtain your *odudu*, and may you return safely to rule your people (Uzukwu 1997: 99).

This brief prayer of the *Nri* myth points out the transforming dimension of religious initiation in the making of an emerging leader (*Eze Nri*), as a civilizing hero. It shows the relationship between prayer and the practice of life in the transformation of the society: The practice of the ritual initiation of the priest is to shape the life of both the priest himself and the people.

The Igbo have decided for Christianity, and the Church (through its priests and religious), has a greater role to play in creating a new culture that will usher in a humane society of healthy and well cared people. The resource for doing this is the gospel message and the Igbo culture. The new evangelization, therefore, is a moment of rebirth of the Igbo through the missionary activity of the local Church. The victory of Christianity in Igboland is to be declared by the Igbo people themselves – it is a hope for what could be called a historical resurrection.
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Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical, *Fidei donum* (12 April 1957), encouraged missionary cooperation between the different local Churches and asked that diocesan priests be trained to cultivate a missionary spirit through which they can render their priestly service also outside their dioceses of incardination.