

African Palaver and Language Learning in Social Reconciliation¹

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Introduction

The theme we have chosen for our reflection in the present write-up is that of African palaver and language learning in social reconciliation. With this theme we intend to honor Bishop Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji as he celebrates the Silver Jubilee of his Episcopal Consecration as Bishop of Umuahia. There is no better theme to honor a person of the caliber of Bishop Ugorji as a pastor of reconciliation, justice and peace than the theme of African palaver model of reconciliation and language learning. Bishop Ugorji, though, makes no recognition of this fact and does not use the African term of palaver in his preaching and writings, however, he has contextualized the gospel teaching on reconciliation in Africa through his attentive attention to management of words in human relations and concern to what unites us as a people than what divides.² His decorum as pastor in the management of words, human relation, cultural sensitivity in conflict resolutions and peace-initiatives are rooted in the model of reconciliation which God has achieved for us all through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. This he has contextualized in our land on the matrix of the African cultural values of palaver model of reconciliation even though he does not use these African terms in his preaching and writings. But a closer observer may notice immediately that Bishop Ugorji, judging from his African background, might have borrowed a lot from that African cultural matrix and value for his pastoral ministry of reconciliation.

In other words, one of the things that has characterized the pastoral ministry of Bishop Ugorji in the past twenty-five years as Bishop of Umuahia and distinguished him as an African pastor of class is his ardent involvement in peace-initiatives and process of reconciliation both within and outside his Diocese. Added to this is his natural endowment and active work in the area of charity to the poor and the marginalized of the society.³ With regard to his work as pastor of reconciliation and peace-initiatives, his Diocese which is the most multi-religious and ecumenically challenged in South Eastern Nigeria had put him in the vantage position for this ministry of reconciliation. His pastoral letters from the first year of his consecration as Bishop of Umuahia till date have always privileged the theme of reconciliation, justice and peace in our increasingly pluralistic society and community.⁴ With regards to his work as pastor of the poor and the marginalized, one needs only look at numerous on-going pastoral initiatives of Bishop Ugorji in that respect in his Diocese and elsewhere. He has continued this pastoral ministry also at the national and inter-regional levels through his function and office as the Chairman of Justice, Development and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria.

¹ This article is originally published in U.J. Njoku – S.O. Anyanwu (eds.), *Shepherd and Teacher: Celebrating Lucius Ugorji's Episcopal Silver Jubilee*, APT Publications, Owerri, Nigeria 2015, 431-481.

² See for example, his Pastoral Letters: L.I. UGORJI, *That They May Have Life*, Snaap Press, Enugu 1993; IDEM, *Jesus Christ the God-made-Man*, Snaap Press, Enugu 1997.

³ Cf. U.J. NJOKU, *In the Service of Charity and Truth: Essays in Honor of Lucius Ugorji*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt 2012.

⁴ For instance, his Pastoral Letter a year after his consecration as Bishop of Umuahia, is entitled: *The Scandal of a Fragmented Christianity*, Snaap Press, Enugu 1991. This was followed by others along that line. For instance, his 1994 Pastoral Letter is entitled: *The Golden Rule: A Reflection on Human Rights*, Snaap Press, Enugu 1994. This was followed by a Pastoral Letter on Environmental Protection, entitled: *Care for Your Environment*, Snaap Press, Enugu 1995.

Our aim in this study is to discuss African palaver as a model of reconciliation and thereafter relate it to the question of language learning in reconciliation process. African palaver as a model of reconciliation is about the management of “words” in reconciliation process which takes place in the public assembly discourse. The African palaver is very significant for language learning in social reconciliation. It is a model with a lot of implications for an appreciation of the importance of the use of “words” in human language as a source of reconciliation in social context. This has implications also as an introduction in an African context, to the catechesis on the “Word of God”, revealed in Jesus Christ as the language of God the Father to humanity and the entire world.

In a letter to participants attending the Seventh General Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation held in Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, described the “Word of God” as the source of reconciliation. Taking his point of departure from the theme of the conference and of the Synod of Bishops, II Special Assembly for Africa, he states: “The theme of the ... Assembly draws attention to how God’s word can restore humanity in reconciliation, justice and peace.”⁵ The Word of God that took flesh in Jesus Christ is the source and goal of our reconciliation process both in theology and in the social context. For us Christians, Jesus Christ is our language of reconciliation. What every Christian is expected to bring to the table of reconciliation or dialogue is nothing else but Jesus Christ, his saving mercy and message of healing communion in our social context. In the social context, however, the power of the word (spoken, written or dramatized) and of our communication of it has an important role to play in reconciliation process. This means that our words of reconciliation should be allowed to be animated and guided by the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, this study aims to make an overview of what we have termed here as language learning in social reconciliation. This is to show that the way we often perceive and remember the “other” in our consciousness and image (spoken, written or dramatized words), culture and religion, could be an obstacle in achieving healthy relationships and co-existence among people of diverse cultures, religions and backgrounds. Here we intend to highlight how the abuse of words in our language of relationship could lead to acts of violence and conflicts in the society. Often conflicts and tensions in the society are as a result of long term built-up prejudices of one group against the other. Over the years the prejudices found their way in our language of relationships and perceptions of the other. Prejudiced perceptions breed disparaged words against the “other” and as such could lead to resentment and hatred from both sides. As modern scholarship on religious and cultural intolerance has shown, there are elements in cultures and religions that influence and shape our perceptions of ourselves in relation to the “other”. These are elements of culture and religious beliefs that are easily manipulated and used in presenting the “other” in his negative relationship to one’s own group. Modern studies have also shown how such negative and cultural perceptions of one group against the “other” legitimize and encourage violence and conflicts in the social context. Again, most of these elements of culture and religious beliefs in themselves are not bad, but as often happens, human beings have the tendency to manipulate the good things in culture and religion for ulterior motives. These motives could be political, economic, psychological, religious, etc. At the long run, however, religious and cultural elements are singled out and accused as been responsible for the acts of violence and conflicts that have their origins in the evil thoughts and desires of the human heart. In other words, the root causes of most of the acts of violence and conflict in our

⁵ *L’Osservatore Romano* (Italian edition), Wednesday June 2008, 1.

modern society is deeper than the often mere allusion to cultural and religious differences. Behind every act of violence and conflict we experience today in the social context, there is often a hidden agenda that goes beyond the usual accusation of differences in culture and religions of the warring groups. The language or words by which one relates with the “other”, is often tailored to serve a particular or narrow interest of one’s own group. In this context, our language of the other (spoken or written words) could, instead of being instrument of promoting reconciliation, peace and justice, be used as an organ for fermenting hatred, lies and violence in the society.

Therefore, as we honor Bishop Ugorji in his 25th anniversary as Bishop, it may not be out of place to emphasize once more, the relevance of African palaver model or reconciliation and language learning in our increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Our study of this theme is developed as follows: a) Reconciliation and mission, b) African Palaver model of reconciliation, c) language learning in reconciliation, and d) Reconciliation and narrative-story in an African context.

1. Reconciliation and Mission

Until recently, theologians have dwelt primarily on the two sides of the Christian concept of reconciliation in relation to the church’s evangelizing mission. While Catholics emphasize the love dimension of reconciliation, Protestants of the Reformation tradition have over the years emphasized the biblical concept of reconciliation as sacrificial atonement. In the last case, reconciliation refers primarily to what Jesus did on the cross and secondarily to the restoration of the divine-human relationship. But as Ross Langmead has pointed out, reconciliation is about transformed relationships through Christ in love, and it could be in several dimensions – which in themselves could be described also as facets of the mission of God: cosmic reconciliation, reconciliation between human beings and God, between human beings themselves and between them and creation. It is about the Christ-event, the work of the Holy Spirit, the overcoming of barriers between Christians, between them and others, the work of the church in the world, peacemaking (the Hebrew notion of *shalom*), ethnic reconciliation, the unity of Christians, inter-religious dialogue, ecological balances between humanity and its natural environment. Reconciliation is about setting things right in human relationships and the languages we use in relating with one another through Christ.⁶ In other words, as a model of mission, reconciliation makes us bearers of love of God, peace and justice in our society. It is in its mission model that reconciliation as a concept assumes it’s most desired significance and emphasis on the conversion of heart in promoting healthy relationship and co-existence in the social context. Thus, there is a neat relationship between reconciliation and conversion.⁷

But the atonement model, is still very fundamental for understanding the Christian concept of reconciliation, although the New Testament references to sacrificial atonement are not numerous (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10, with reference to Jesus as the paschal lamb in

⁶ Cf. R. LANGMEAD, “Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission”, in *Mission Studies*, 25(2008)1, 5ff.

⁷ Cf. R. LANGMEAD, “Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission”,

John 1, Acts 8:32, 1 Corinthians 5:7 and 1 Peter 1:19). It is clear that the Jewish practice of sacrifice provided a ready metaphor for early Jewish Christians and that have shaped their understanding of reconciliation. Recent studies show that this view could be enlarged by emphasizing the other dimensions of Christian concept of reconciliation evidenced in the Bible. We cannot limit God's reconciliation in Christ only to one model, at the expense of others. We need to take into account the entire range of the saving mystery of Jesus Christ if we are even to begin to understand its deep meaning.⁸

If we take a wider view, the model of reconciliation becomes very clear in the scriptural passages that talk of our being reconciled to God and to one another through God's great love for us (Romans 5); and which says that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, with Christians called to be ambassadors for this reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5). The Letter to the Colossians 1, dramatizes in rather more clear terms the cosmic dimensions of this restoration of relationships, and presents Christ as the one who has made peace for all things, on earth and in heaven. The central Christian affirmation is that in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself. In other words, through the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ God has reached out in forgiving and reconciling love. Thus, as Langmead notes, the restoring of friendship and peace is a key image in reconciliation process.⁹

Modern biblical scholarship emphasizes the link between reconciliation and peace. The Hebrew notion of *shalom*, meaning well-being, harmony or wholeness, typically in a social context, could be said to be the goal of reconciliation (at least between human beings). This means that whereas reconciliation more often refers to a process *shalom* is a state (albeit a dynamic one). But in its wider usage, *shalom* goes beyond the notion of healthy relationships conveyed by reconciliation – it includes physical well-being and prosperity.¹⁰ This shows the central place the question of justice should occupy in *shalom* and reconciliation process. Both *shalom* and reconciliation imply the presence of justice. The biblical idea of peace – *shalom* involves a right ordering of relationships, in which justice leads to peace (cf. Isaiah 32:16-17; Psalm 85:10). This is as opposed to the Roman idea of peace, the *Pax Romana*, which amounted to massive military subjugation. *Shalom* is about peaceful resolution and ordering of relationships. It is also about the reign of justice in the society. This is precisely where *shalom* and reconciliation meets in a more radical way. As Schreiter argues, reconciliation without justice is a false reconciliation, because it tries to ignore the suffering of the oppressed. It tries to bury history without dealing with it. Rather than forgiving and forgetting, what is actually required in social and national reconciliation is to “re-member” history, telling the truth, working through the pain and, where possible, repairing the damage and restoring relationships. There is no reconciliation without liberation.¹¹

However, the concepts of both *shalom* and reconciliation go further than justice in its usual sense.¹² *Shalom* and reconciliation point to justice, but they do not stop there. Biblical notions of

⁸ Cf. J. DRIVER, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, Herald, Scottdale PA 1986, 244.

⁹ Cf. R. LANGMEAD, “Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission”, 8.

¹⁰ Cf. C. WESTERMANN, “Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament”, in P.B. YODER & W.M. SWARTLEY (eds.), *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies*, John Knox, Westminster 1992, 21. See also P.B. YODER, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace*, Spire, London 1989, 11.

¹¹ Cf. R.J. SCHREITER, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1992, 18-25.

¹² Cf. R. LANGMEAD, “Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission”, 9.

divine justice are more holistic. In ordinary society, for instance, justice can be said to be done when a criminal is punished. But the perpetrator and the victim may live the rest of their lives bitter and un-reconciled. In this case, their relationship remains broken and there is no reconciliation. However, God's justice is associated with mercy, forgiveness, righteousness and reestablishment of right relationships. It is a holistic justice that amounts to genuine reconciliation, and that is primarily restorative rather than a retributive. Again, while *shalom* usually refers to a state, reconciliation more usually to a process. It is for this reason that Paul speaks of Christians as being called to be ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18), and in the gospel Christians are called peacemakers (Matthew 5:9).

2. The African Palaver Model of Reconciliation

The term palaver was recently introduced into philosophical, ethical, and theological discourse by Francophone African scholars as a model to discuss and seek solutions to challenging issues. For these African scholars, palaver means the art and discipline of public discourse within a participative assembly in a public space, in an open courtyard or under a tree. It involves the use of simple words in order to tackle problematic issues touching on all areas of life and to seek relevant and workable solutions. Palaver takes the name "African palaver model" to depict that communicative community spirit, the interactive dialogue that animates many African community's affairs for holistic interventions on issues of life and the maintenance of relationships within the entire hierarchy of existence. The palaver model has been and is still the medium and process where individual and community life issues are discussed, researched, cultivated, nurtured and actuated in many African communities. It is an appropriate community model to resolve contradictions among people and strengthen mutual links of solidarity among all members of the community. Through the word, the African traditional communities are able to discuss public affairs, resolve conflicts and create judicial acts that are efficacious in confronting present and future community problems.

Palaver is a technical term. It may have derived from a Portuguese word *palavra*, meaning a talk between tribal people and traders, or it may have a close connection with the French word *palabre*, which connotes a lively discussion, debate, or the process of a tribunal in a village. In whichever case, palaver refers to a participative community debate with the aim of finding solutions to pressing individual, family, and community issues. It is a community assembly through which everything that concerns the life of an African is discussed. Through the power of the word in a palaver discourse, Africans discuss public affairs, resolve conflicts, formulate juridical acts, etc.¹³

Generally speaking, palaver is a relatively new concept in philosophical and theological circles. Scholars in different disciplines have tried to elaborate upon its profound significance. For some it is merely useless, meaningless talk that occurs in market places or in the streets, with little or no practical consequences. For some others, especially, those who have mechanical orientation of life and calculate it in monetary terms, it is a waste of valuable time. However, in the African context, palaver has a deeper meaning and significance. According to Richard K. Chelimo, palaver, however, should be differentiated from a mere family or community meeting. Palaver is invoked on rare occasions to deal with very serious family or community issues, and it is open to all people.

¹³ Cf. J.G. BIDIMA, *La Palabre. Une juridiction de le parole*, Michaelon, Paris 1997, 109.

Thus, it is unlike a meeting which is convoked by the head of the family or the chief to inform on a specific issue touching the family or community. Meetings are informative and limited in nature, while palaver goes deeper, looking for root causes and involving lively discussions and binding resolutions. Palaver is not led by the chief but by a council of elders, people who are well known, respected and knowledgeable about issues of communal life. In the palaver discourse the chief participates actively like every other community member and gives his views as any other active community member. The chief's power comes into force when the elders and the whole assembly have agreed on the way forward over an issue in the palaver assembly. The chief uses his authority to confirm the common position on the issue at hand to safeguard and implement the deliberations. He does this with the assistance from all the community members, who are the primary custodians of the community values.¹⁴ According to Magesa, palaver could be described as a constant fellowship of African sages, leading the community towards the realization of harmonious relationships and ethical norms that protect and promote life in all its complexity.”¹⁵

Some Characteristics of Palaver Discourse

From the above discussion, the following characteristics of palaver can be identified: a) the power of words in palaver discourse, b) the African Palaver Tree – (which includes respect to the tradition and customs of the people as handed down from the ancestors), and finally, c) the communitarian dimension of palaver. In what follows, we shall make a brief analysis of these key aspects of African palaver.

a) The power of Words in Palaver Discourse

Again, the palaver model was one of the viable means Africans of the traditional society used in resolving conflicts and tensions in the social context. Nowadays scholars are beginning to rediscover the relevance of this model for our contemporary society. The constitutive elements of this process are the power of the word, spoken or unspoken, the word as dramatized in dance or mime or symbolized in art, the “word” understood as action or “behavior – in the constant presence of the community in its three dimensions of the living, the dead, and those yet to be born. The African palaver aims at creating, strengthening or restoring relationships for the sake of “the fullness” of life of the community through fellowship among all three dimensions of the community. In other words, the palaver is always a communitarian affair. It is also dialogical because it is structured to involve in conversation and fellowship all the members of the community in very intricate ways.

This confirms the fact that African palaver is about the power of words in reconciliation and healing process. Palaver embodies the issues of the management of words in promoting human relationships and in the search for healing words in conflict resolution. It relies on the power, intelligence and sensitive use of words in reconciliation and dialogue process. It is a reconciliation

¹⁴ Cf. R.K. CHELIMO, *Reconciliation in the 21st Century: African Palaver as a Model of Reconciliation Model*, Kolbe Press, Limuru, Kenya 2013, 10-11.

¹⁵ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2004, 178-179.

model that promotes equality, justice and peace for all who are caught up by the problem of conflicts and violence in the social context. When well applied, the palaver model (as was employed in South Africa after the demise of Apartheid or in Rwanda after the genocide war of 1994)), restores the dignity of the victim of violence and makes him bearer of peace and reconciliation with the wrongdoer. Both the victim of violence and the wrongdoer are transformed in an atmosphere of fraternal discussion and community witness. Reconciliation process begins when people are prepared to come together and discuss their perceived differences in an atmosphere of equality and respect of individual perspective and experience with a view of arriving at the healing word and reconciliation. It is in such an assembly discussion that the healing and reconciling words are produced. This is the African palaver (*palabre*).

Again, the African palaver is a popular assembly (meeting or forum), in which the people debate all that concern the life of a person or community. As noted above, through palaver, Africans discuss their public affairs, resolve conflicts, stipulate juridical acts, etc. Thus, the African palaver is basically communitarian in character. Its scope is that of taking care of the interests of everyone and of all in the community. In fact, it can be said that recourse is made to palaver for the affairs that touch on the common and personal interests in so far as both – communitarian and personal make up the constitution of the social order and the life of the community. Palaver is a procedure that conserves the actuality and efficacy of the African model of reconciliation. It is based on the function of the word in its communitarian dimension.

b) The Palaver Tree

The African palaver is the time when the community gathers in an assembly forum. It is the favorite time when the people gather together in the village square – or courtyard, or under the Tree of the village central shrine, and talk about their common concerns. In the African setting, only serious issues affecting the life and collective destiny of the people are convoked and discussed under the ancestral village square Palaver Tree. One of the reasons for this is the conviction that all those involved in the palaver discourse would be under the protection and guidance of their ancestors, customs and tradition for truth-telling in the palaver discourse. It is in such an assembly of truth-telling under the Tree of Palaver that the healing words are spoken and recognized by all and sundry in the reconciliation process. Healing words spoken at the assembly forum of palaver discourse are seen as abiding for the living because upon them depends the way out for healing and reconciliation in the community. Moreover, they are words uttered through the guidance and the ever-abiding presence of the ancestors who in the first place, are invoked at the beginning of the palaver assembly gathering and participate actively, though mystically, in any of such village or family assembly of their living members. For the Africans, such healing words of reconciliation spoken during the palaver assembly forum are words of abiding rule of life, a rule that must be possessed by the living, for upon them depends their welfare and wholeness (*Heil*). At the palaver assembly forum, Africans live out their ancestral belief on the communion between the living and the dead. In other words, the assembly discourse under the Palaver Tree on the part of the living Africans is no mere secular exercise. It must be understood as part of the general frame work of ancestor respect and therefore sacred. The gestures of the ancestors enacted through rituals and the African's effort to conform his conduct to the traditions and customs handed down from their

ancestors are seen as life-and-death rule of conduct, guarantors of salvation and a testament for posterity.¹⁶ This means as well that under the Palaver Tree, each speaker is obliged to tell the truth and utter the healing words that the community needs at that particular time for its continued existence.

Furthermore, at the palaver meeting, the personal voice and identity of each member of the community are constitutive of the engagement with the assembly talk and discourse. Each member is given a face and voice in the palaver discourse. Through this process, each member has his dignity intact and the opportunity to make a contribution for the enhancement of the life of the community. Detachment or rather disinterestedness in the affairs of the community is not possible in the palaver.¹⁷ Commitment and engagement in the affairs and life of the community are of the very nature of resolving conflicts and divisions in the African context of palaver. By participating actively in the community discourse, the people are not merely theoretically committed, but also, and equally, more so practically engaged in the transformation of their community and that of their concrete life situations. Moreover, through the palaver model, the people act as the interpreter between the present reality of conflict or tension and tradition of their ancestors. In this case then, the living by the people of their ancestral tradition assumes a community character. The community acts as “a sort of bridge between the present reality and their ancestral culture and tradition” – projecting reconciliation, peace and justice in their society.

All this implies that the discourse on reconciliation process also involves reference to the customs: the assembly deliberation in the palaver context belongs also to the tradition of the people. This is so since to tradition, belongs the task of interpreting and protecting the cultures and customs of the community. The challenge in reconciliation process therefore in the palaver context, is for the assembly deliberation to be true to its character and objectivity of faithfulness to the tradition and customs of the community and to ensure the triumph of peace and justice in the long run. Those involved in the palaver discourse are to work both from deep commitment to the welfare of all in the community and from broad cultural sensitivity. Commitment to and engagement with community through public assembly and discourse does not constitute something new in the history of humankind; rather it is reliving in our own time the original, necessary process of reconciliation.

Therefore, by seeking for reconciliation in a social realm in the context of palaver, the African model offers the people the opportunity to talk about their differences in an atmosphere of equality of all participants, with a view of arriving at a peaceful and just solution. It is living together their experience as a people in the context of mutual discourse or dialogue. The palaver model takes the form of narrative as a reconciliation process and in directing the living experience of the people towards peaceful co-existence. Again, the determining principle here is the life of the community together with its constituent parts. Reconciliation, peace and justice as sublime virtues grow in the life of the people through the community itself. Community in turn is constructed upon the existential experience of being known. “I am known, therefore we are, *“cognatus sum, ergo sumus.”*¹⁸ As one author remarks, being known in the sense of the concrete and unbroken interaction

¹⁶ Cf. J. PARRATT, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1995, 129

¹⁷ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, “Le vie del dialogo nel contesto africano”, in E. SCOGNAMIGLIO – A. TREVISIOL (eds.), *Nel convivio delle differenze: Il dialogo nelle società del terzo millennio*, Urbaniana University Press, Rome 2007, 76.

¹⁸ Cf. B. BUJO, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroads, New York 2001, 5.

among all members of the community is the essence of relatedness and fellowship. As such, it is not a favor that the individual owes to community or vice versa. Rather it is seen in African moral anthropology as the key of human existence. It is the essence of the structure of community itself. On it depends, the enhancement of the life of the individual together with that of the community.¹⁹

c) The Communitarian Aspect of Palaver Discourse

The palaver is based on the African sense of the community. As a model of reconciliation, it suggests itself to the effort towards the restoration of the dignity and self-esteem of the victim of violence and conflicts. It aims to achieve reconciliation in an atmosphere of equality, justice and peace, and in the context of community gathering and deliberations. Where a member of the community is missing or not allowed to participate in the discourse as equal partner, reconciliation or dialogue is elusive. There is no reconciliation or dialogue where any member or party is left out in the process. Palaver, therefore, is about the active participation of all the parties concerned and the community at large in the reconciliation process. All the parties involved have equal voice and opportunities in reconciliation. Again, in this model, reconciliation assumes a communitarian function. The palaver model lays emphasis on the transforming power of the spoken words for both the victim and the wrongdoer. Here the stress is on the communitarian spirit, and the capacity of each party to listen and dialogue with the other in the reconciliation process. The emphasis is on the capacity to listen to the other, respect his identity and dignity as a human person created in the image and likeness of God.

Therefore, the first point to be underlined here is the intermediary role of African anthropology and communitarian notions in the reconciliation process. It is a process based on community anthropology and African philosophy of interrelatedness as key factors in this framework. Community in Africa, quite different from what it implies in communitarian notions and discourses elsewhere, involves very intimately all aspects of the person living with other people (kith and kin and beyond here on earth). But it also involves the dead members of the group and whoever might be born in it in the near or distant future. It takes into consideration the universe with which the community interacts – both visible and spiritual realities.²⁰ Constant fellowship among all these realities is the foundational element of the “palaver” – the African communitarian discourse. The palaver itself constitutes the process of ethical and religious consciousness of a people.

All this shows, once more, that the emphasis is on the advantage of community participation in the form of narrative assembly discourse for common good and benefit of all. The palaver model is all the more important because the identity of a person and that of the community is a cultural and narrative identity.²¹ Through participation in the public discourse, the people interpret their lives in the light of the assembly gathering, and then weave that story of their own and their community's life around the palaver model. To listen to a story, one must be prepared to have his life changed by the story itself. The person who participates and has equal rights with all others in a community

¹⁹ Cf. L. MAGESA, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 1997, 71.

²⁰ Cf. J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, Oxford 1990, 106.

²¹ Cf. P. RICOEUR, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, University Press, Chicago 1988, 244ff.

gathering, when he talks or listens will be able to interpret the reality as a transformed one. By appropriating the world proposed during the palaver discourse, every participant transforms his actual world (understood as the total complex of reference in which one lives). Since Africans define the human person in terms of being-in-relation with others, the transformation of the community implies the transformation of oneself.

In other words, in the African palaver the discussion on reconciliation is not an isolated enterprise. This is because in Africa, both social and religious affairs are primarily community events.²² This is to say that the process of reconciliation happens in the context of the African model of “Palaver.” As said before, the Palaver discourse takes place under an “African Tree” or shade and therefore under the custodian and protection of the ancestors, tradition and customs of the people. For us Christians, however, Jesus Christ is our new tree of Palaver. Again, the palaver model is rooted in the African sense of the community. The accent is on the African worldview, according to which the flow of life of the human person is dependent on the capacity of the individual to relate and maintain the inter-relationship in the community in which one is a member. The relationship is between oneself and the others in the community, and between them and their ancestors and other divine beings. Relationality is a central concept in the African worldview and as such should play a key role in dialogue and reconciliation. Again, community and relationality are parts and parcels of the multiple dynamisms that characterize the palaver model.

To sum up, the palaver model is about equity, equality, justice and peace for all who are caught up by the problem of conflicts and violence in the social context. The palaver model goes beyond the current use of the words, solidarity and tolerance. In as much as these two words are good in themselves, they do not, however, touch the heart of the matter. The fact is that the current usage of these terms, carry with it, a sense of paternalism. This is because its theory is based on the conception that it is the duty of the so called “senior members of the human family” to decide and provide for the rest, considered to be junior members of the same human family. This theory promotes what we call, “us and they” syndrome. It is a divisive principle and therefore antithesis to reconciliation, peace and justice in the social realm.

On its own part, however, the palaver model is about the equality of all the parties and participants in dialogue and reconciliation. It does not discriminate nor is it based on the principle of divide and rule. The palaver model promotes the common destiny of a people in dialogue and reconciliation. It puts God first, and shows that in community and individual matters and deliberations, people matter, people count.

The South African model of Palaver

In a recent work, Russell Daye examines the process of reconciliation which was applied in South Africa after the collapse of the dreaded Apartheid regime there. Some have argued that African palaver model inspired this post-Apartheid reconciliation process in South Africa, and would recommend that it could be reproduced in other places in Africa which are still experiencing situations of mutual conflict. Daye studies the South Africa’s “Truth and Reconciliation

²² Cf. A.E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2008, xi.

Commission.” His interest, however, is on the measure of forgiveness which the Africans exhibited towards the architects and leaders of the Apartheid after the collapse of that system. The Apartheid system was based on separate development of peoples of different races living in South Africa. After coming to power in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) government launched the largest and most intricately designed process of post-conflict healing that the world has yet seen. At the center of this process was the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (TRC), headed by Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu.²³ Among other things, the aim of this commission was to assist the country and the people to come to terms with the dark past of the Apartheid once and for all. Indeed, that African palaver inspired the work of the TRC can be gleaned from the following statements of Archbishop Tutu in his inaugural address of the commission’s work:

They say that those who suffer from amnesia, those who forget the past, are doomed to repeat it. It is not dealing with the past to say facilely, let bygones be bygones, for then they won’t be bygones. Our country, our society would be doomed to the instability of uncertainty – the uncertainty engendered by not knowing when yet another scandal of the past would hit the headlines, when another skeleton would be dragged out of the cupboard.

In the same passage, Tutu adds:

We will be engaging in what should be a corporate nationwide process of healing through contrition, confession and forgiveness. To be able to forgive one needs to know whom one is forgiving and why. That is why the truth is so central to this whole exercise. The hope for forgiveness is stated up front - not simply a transactional forgiveness between individual perpetrators and their individual victims, but a “nationwide process.”²⁴

Therefore, the TRC is about the participation of all in the community in public discourse for healing the past wounds and for society transformation of both the victims and the wrongdoers of the Apartheid regime. It is a forum which is direct with concerted attempt to help the people to come to terms with massive social disruption in the past so that there may be greater harmony in the future. Thus, Tutu states:

We are meant to be a part of the process of the healing of our nation, of our people, all of us, since every South African has to some extent or other been traumatized. We are wounded people because of the conflict of the past, no matter on which side we stood. We all stand in need of healing.²⁵

This is the perspective from which Daye in his book explored the theoretical and challenges relevant to the articulation of the TRC model of reconciliation, which he calls a model of political forgiveness. He asserts that forgiveness has a core grammar, which is stretched and tested but not broken when we move from the interpersonal to the sociopolitical realm. Daye interprets this grammar, describing it as a process, which in my own view, typifies what we have described here as a model of palaver, though Daye himself, did not use that expression. He identifies three acts played out in the TRC model: 1) the naming and articulation of the harm done; 2) an apology in which the offending party confesses the wrong done and accepts responsibility; and 3) the offering of

²³ Cf. R. DAYE, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2004, 4.

²⁴ R. DAYE, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa*, 5.

²⁵ R. DAYE, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa*, 5.

forgiveness by the victimized. However, Daye recognizes that political forgiveness, like interpersonal forgiveness, cannot be effective unless it is done in the context of the entire community participation as in the palaver narrative model of reconciliation. Thus he writes that an important issue is the selection of the community leaders or representatives who will guide any formal process of truth-telling. It is essential that they be people trusted by all segments of society, that they represent the experience of diverse communities, and that their approach to truth-telling be balanced. After all, in a situation of mass conflict there will never be one fully innocent party or one fully guilty party. For this reason, Daye adds another act concerned with transitional justice and another with psychological and social healing, thus, arriving at a drama of political forgiveness in five acts:

Act One: truth telling

Act Two: apology and claiming of responsibility

Act Three: building a transitional justice framework

Act Four: finding ways to heal

Act five: embracing forgiveness.²⁶

In any case, each of the first four acts may be said to have a sociopolitical goal that can never be considered an end in itself. Moreover, each of them can be considered a leg on a journey for the total transformation of the people who have experienced mutual conflicts and violence in their society as was the case in South Africa itself. This also means that for a true reconciliation to occur, a commission like TRC cannot seed a whole country with a forgiveness that will be harvested after a short season. It must be something in which the entire community is involved and desired for in their consciousness as a people who are determined to surpass their painful past. It must be seen as a community act in which the right and dignity of each member and of the parties involved are respected. Any act to ignore the community participation in the palaver discourse or that of its citizens or to impose external or foreign decisions which have not first been debated and evaluated by the people, destroys the very foundation on which the society itself is built. This explains why this model which has worked in South Africa could not work in some places in Africa where an allusion to it was made but unfortunately hijacked as a result of some conflicting interests exhibited by both internal and especially, external operators of the system. Selfish interest by operators of the system is an antithesis to the ideals of the palaver. Palaver model is a community affair. It belongs to the people since it is the reliving and celebrating of their cultural heritage and means of resolving conflicts in the society. The role of any outsider should be minimal in the palaver model, if at all needed. What is at stake is the life of the people themselves and interpretation of their culture and customs in conflict resolution and reconciliation. Every other interest (internal or external) is secondary to these foundational elements of the society in question.

This is the point of departure in my relating the TRC model of reconciliation to the African palaver, which is rooted in the people's culture and tradition. This link is not by chance. While my interpretation of African palaver is not theological as such, I intend it to be applicable to a wide range of contexts, both secular and religious. This relates my kind of African palaver to a

²⁶ Cf. R. DAYE, *Political Forgiveness: Lessons from South Africa*, 148.

theological evaluation of reconciliation as spirituality. When we consider the interplay of cultures and identities in the palaver model we are moving onto “sacred grounds.” For the Africans, as Daye also agrees, nothing is more important than their web of relationships and symbol systems that inform and animate that web. The palaver model of reconciliation is about bringing anew into existence in the society, that web of relationships. It is about remaining faithful to our most deeply beliefs as a people. The palaver brings into relief the cultural creativity of Africans and dramatizes how they move and live the essence of their being as a people: “we are in relation, therefore, I am.”

3. Language Learning in Reconciliation

The preceding discussion on African palaver challenges us to examine the importance of language learning in reconciliation process and to highlight, once more, the working of the force of words (spoken, written or dramatized) in human relations and in promoting a culture of reconciliation in the society. It is a common belief that violence takes place, first of all in the human hearts and thoughts before ever it occurs in the open. It is the problem of the mind or rather mentality of the person or a group in relating with the “other.” In this context and as discussed already, we are faced with the manipulation of differences in religions and cultures of different peoples and warring groups for ulterior motives. Besides that, however, there is also the question of abuse of words and negative use of language in relating and speaking of the “other.” The tendency to blame differences in culture and religious beliefs of warring groups as the reason for acts of violence and conflicts in the society could be a way of hiding the evil intentions in the human hearts from which those acts of violence and conflicts have their origin. It is another way we often shy away from what goes on in the human heart which is the actual origin of our actions in the social sphere. In the same vein, our use of negative words or language in speaking about the “other”, his culture and religion could be also a tactical means of concealing what goes on in the human heart. Our language then about the “other” is tailored in such a way that the “other” is often presented in its negative image before one’s own people and to the rest of the world. Every effort is made to create a false image of the “other” in the consciousness of one’s own people and the world at large.

Therefore, in keeping with the aim of this write-up, it may not be superfluous to state once more what we have said before concerning elements of culture and religions and causes of violence in the society. The emphasis here is that religious and cultural elements could be manipulated for political and personal interests by some *bad* elements in the society. This means that imbedded in cultures and religions are those elements that often encourage or promote violence and conflict among the people in the society. In other words, in some religious and cultural beliefs, we could trace some notable sources of violence and conflicts in the present social context. Again, on their own, some of the cultural and religious elements being referred to here are good, but as often happen human beings have the tendency of turning good things into something undesirable. What all this points to, is the fact that the human person is responsible for acts of violence, since only him has the capacity and liberty to manipulate those elements in cultures and religions that foster and legitimize violence. The human person could do this through abusive use of language. All this confirms our argument that cultures and religions could be manipulated by some people to cause

violence in the society because they facilitate and legitimize individuals, groups, and institutions to acts of violence.

Therefore, language learning should assume a major role in the process of reconciliation in the social order. To promote reconciliation in the present social context, there is need for a new language in the way we relate and talk about the “other”, his culture and religious beliefs. Promoting reconciliation in the social order will depend to a large extent on how prepared we are to promote sensitivity in the words we often use about the other people and their cultural or religious heritage, race, etc. Of particular importance are the cultural and religious elements or heritage of the “other” people. There is nothing that provokes human emotion and resentment easily as the use of disparaged words in speaking and relating with a particular group or the “other.” Most people can tolerate personal insult but when such insult is directed to one’s own people and what they hold very dear (e.g.: cultural and religious beliefs), the reaction could be very swift if not violent. This is a human phenomenon, though very unfortunate, but it is something that presents a challenge to our use of language in relation to the “other.” No relatively conscious or decent person will like to stay in a conference or read a work where his own people are disparaged and presented in negative image in relation to the others.

This does not mean keeping silent over the negative and oppressive elements of culture and religious beliefs. Oppressive elements of culture and religious beliefs should be exposed and corrected without using them as weapon for psychological attack and of demeaning the self-dignity and self-confidence of the “other.” Cultural and religious beliefs are held very dear by the people who lay claim to them and any unguided attack or abusive use of words against them could fuel those factors that sustain in a society the ugly phenomenon of hatred, conflicts and divisions.

On a deeper level, the negative portrayal of the “other” aims at making him feel self-pity and loathe himself and his heritage. However, if something positive is said about him, his culture or religion, place of origin strategic importance to the world, its indispensability and relevance to global development, and the wealth of nations, derived from involuntary largesse of his people, there is no doubt that this will begin a new face in the way the world will be relating with one another. In other words, a positive presentation of the “other” will help to minimize the frustrating issues that confront the poor or immigrant of our day, as the case may be, who is out of his own world – the frustration of being dehumanized often by the language of the other.

Reconciliation and conversion

Reconciliation is about the conversion of the human heart from which originates those actions of man that foster and legitimize violence in the society. Modern studies have shown that reconciliation is about the conversion of the human heart from sin which is the root cause of violence and conflicts. And this has been the teaching of the church from time immemorial. Reconciliation is about change of mentality and of developing positive attitude towards God and one’s neighbor. Reconciliation is about overcoming our negative perceptions about God and the “other.” Again, reconciliation begins with the human heart. It is the change of heart that will allow in the flow of goodness in one to shine forth in his or her relationship with God and neighbor. Reconciliation is first and foremost the work of God achieved in Christ. It is God working in us

through Christ to reconcile us to himself and make us bearers of his reconciling work in our societies.

In other words, in exploring the theology of reconciliation and peace initiatives in diverse circumstances and conflict situations, we are confronted with some of the cultural and religious elements that could easily be manipulated to cause conflicts and violence in the society. While theology teaches us that the root cause of human conflicts and violence or tensions and divisions in the society is in sin – in the human heart, we are also coming to the realization of the role of cultural and religious elements that could foster and encourage people to act in violent ways. Furthermore, it is becoming clearer nowadays that hatred among peoples and nations, receives flesh also through our language or words we use in relating, and in describing the cultural and religious beliefs of the “other:” As the Bible teaches us, fear him not who kills the body but the spirit (cf. Matthew 10,28). Violence against the “other” is built up through the language or words we use to refer to the “other” and his or her cultural and religious heritage. In this age of media technology, this issue should assume a central place in reconciliation process.

In spite of the advancement in science and technology, the world remains divided, weighed down with violence: ideological conflicts, terrorism of all sorts in increasingly violent forms, pathological forms of nationalism, racial and psychological violence, ethnic cleansing, famine, domestic violence, workplace abuse, cyberspace violence, political and economic violence, intercultural violence, abuse of words, and accepting violence as normal. Today, people keep distance from each other, judging the other often in negative terms. There is increasing situations of mental distance existing between two communities or people that by nature are supposed to be close neighbors. This has continued to happen in spite of the much talk about globalization and world becoming a kind of a village because of advancement in communications and other aspects of modern technologies and sciences. It is no longer secret to say that media outfits have in some cases been used to ferment conflicts and violence in the society. The abuse of words, include also the discourse on the modern mechanism of political rhetoric. It is a discourse that pretends to speak of positive things but produces the opposite; that speaks of peace but produces war and terrorism; that speaks of equality of all but produces inequality; that speaks of fighting poverty but produces structures of impoverishment of the powerless. The abuse of words in this regard, is a manipulation of political rhetoric – political *sermons* devoid of any intention or effort to match words with action.

This is a preoccupation about the war rhetoric that characterizes most of the discourses on international diplomacy today. Nowadays major actors on international stage of politics think and act more with military strength than with common sense and language of sincere reconciliation. In the same context among those who feel alienated or oppressed by the powerful, are increasingly resorting to various forms or acts of terrorism. The sublime terms, *justice* and *security* are these days subjected to abuse and unnecessary manipulation by both the powerful and the powerless. Also, in recent times, some nations have developed severe laws of immigration that prevent healthy relationships and sincere contacts with those who do not belong to their geopolitical and religious cultural categorization, or with whom they do not share the same political and economic systems and life style. Propaganda of hate against the *foreigner* is becoming a new culture in most countries of the so called developed world. Anti-immigration political parties have emerged in most of these countries with the claim of fighting for national security. These parties are beginning to receive acceptance even during elections in the countries concerned.

Reconciliation and our language of the “other”

Again, the theology of reconciliation which we have considered in this study, states that the root cause of violence and conflicts in the present social context could be located in sin – in the human heart. And as the Bible teaches, what defiles a man is not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of it (cf. Matthew 15, 10-11). Our language about the other people springs from the human heart. The purity of our language about the “other” depends to a large extent on the purity of the heart. If the heart is pure it will produce pure and healing words about the “other.” But if the heart is deceitful and full of hatred about the “other”, it will produce words of violence and hatred. The result of an impure heart is arrogance and deceit. It is resentment of truth, and goodness in the “other.” Therefore, there is an intimate link between the language we use about the “other” and the state of the human heart. Ultimately, this means that reconciliation in the social context cannot ignore penitential theology. If sin in the hearts of men is at the root cause of conflicts and violence in the social order, the effort to do away with sin in our lives has a central role in the process of reconciliation. Thus, we meet the relevance of theology of reconciliation in the present social context.

Therefore, there is a close link between theology of reconciliation in religious sphere and reconciliation in the social context. The reconciliation achieved in Christ has two dimensions: transcendental and horizontal: reconciliation with God and the neighbor. It is eschatological as well as inter-personal or social in nature. It is precisely for this reason that one must appreciate the renewed emphasis the theme of reconciliation is beginning to receive in the reflections of missiologists. Today, there are beginning to emerge genuine efforts and concerns to achieve peace through reconciliation in many of the conflict situations that have engulfed the modern society. Christians believe that Christ has reconciled all peoples far and near with God and with one another in peace (Ephesians 2:16-18). Today, Christians feel they are called to be witnesses of this reconciliation and peace among nations and peoples.

In other words, we are confronted more and more with how our use of language in relation to the “other” is increasingly becoming an urgent issue in reconciliation in the social context. Human beings, being what they are, have the tendency to manipulate the divisive elements in culture and religion to ferment hatred against the “other” through the abusive use of words in their languages. The abuse of words is found not only in the spoken words, but also on the written words, in literature, philosophy, theology, sociology, and especially in the media, etc. It is found in the customs and inherited cultural abusive words of the “other” that the society is often not so conscious of. Again, in this age of information technology, the media could serve as the easiest and quickest avenue to promote peace and reconciliation in a conflict situation. However, the media is also a powerful weapon that could be used in propagating the mindset in words and images that set one people against the other in a subtle but an effective way. Why do people pay for adverts in television, radio, newspapers or internet websites? It is because they want to make good image of themselves and products. They know the power and usefulness of these modern means of social communication in marketing industry and image-making politics. Images are very important.

In this context, the issue of reconciliation in its social context assumes a new and sophisticated dimension. What role does our negative use of words in relation to the other people play in causing hatred and conflicts or wars among the diverse communities and people? What is the force of the words of the mouth and pen or images we create about the “other” in enhancing peaceful co-existence among people of diverse cultures and religions or as the case may be, in causing conflicts among them? How do we establish a link between what the Christian theology teaches us about sin in the human heart as the root cause of conflicts and divisions among the people with the new realization that the negative words we use while speaking of the “other” have their origins also from the same human heart? Christian theology speaks of the human heart as the origin of evil intentions one harbors against the other. This is recognition of the fact that man is responsible for the conflicts and divisions in the social order. Human language and words originate from the depth of the human heart. Our words and language bring to real what has been harbored in the human mind. It could be elements for peace-building and in that case, the indwelling grace of God in man assumes its highest and noblest goal and mission. Be that as it may, from the depth of human heart comes also all the evil desires as the Bible teaches us. If one’s language in human relations is full of war rhetoric ... this will inevitable take flesh and the consequences could be enormous of which violence against the other is one of them. In other words, the actions of man in the social sphere have their origins first of all, in human hearts. From the human heart springs the words one uses in human relations and actions. Reconciliation therefore, should begin with the human heart and the call for change of mentality or our negative perception of the “other.”

Thus, we are confronted with what some have described as *historical baggage* about reporting, speaking or writing about the “other.” Again, it has been argued that one of the major factors governing our relationship or perception of the “other” (with whom one’s own group has a historical uneasiness or conflicting political and economic interests) is the tendency to perceive that other group in its negative image in relation to one’s own group. As noted before, this fact is best illustrated in the present day role of the international media in reporting about people of the other cultural and religious groups. Most of the views we are presented with today in some specialized studies and media about the “other” is, in most cases, infected with the prevailing wisdom of the previous centuries’ scholarship that tended to present the other people in its negative relationship with one’s own group or people. For example, in the previous studies and scholarship about the colonized or conquered people of the past, there was the deliberate effort to present them in their negative image, as primitive, unintelligent and barbaric people. There is a way you will be speaking of somebody (or people) in negative terms, either consciously or unconsciously, you see the person behaving in that way. In spite of advancement in social sciences and human relations, this colonial image of the “conquered people” is still very much with us and is not about to go away in the consciousness of the people of the former colonizing powers.

However, when we begin to show in our studies and reporting the positive image of the “other”, this historical baggage will whittle away and a new form of relationship based on equality, justice, sincerity and love will be born. Because the ordinary people from the other zones of the planet will now know that their own place is not the only nice place on earth and that they are not the only civilized people in the world. It will mean that the people will now see that the sun also shines in other places as in theirs.

4. Reconciliation and Narrative Story in an African Context

As in the case of African palaver model, African scholars are beginning to reflect on the role of narrative story in social reconciliation and people-building in the society.²⁷ For the Africa authors, understanding stories and imagination that lie beneath founding of the present nation-states in their continent and the ability to interpret them in the light of the story of Jesus Christ will aid in the process of reconciliation. This is so because, social reconciliation today, more than any other social concerns, has more to do with creating a new environment for attitudinal change and new *ethos* for building a new society inspired by the Gospel story and the memory of the people themselves. There is the common assumption that to the jurisdiction of politics belongs the role of fixing the social and material conditions of life, and to the Christianity's social engagement, which belongs to the realm of religion, the role of providing strategies for improving the existing political institutions. But while this assumption may confirm Christianity's social relevance in a continent like Africa, it does not explain why exaggerated ethnicity, tribal conflicts, poverty, corruption, religious intolerance and violence have been endemic to modern Africa's social history. Neither does it get to the heart of the Christian story, which is a fresh vision for the world in which we live. Moreover, it does not pay sufficient attention to the possibility that politics in many African nation-states, as a matter of fact, have not been a failure, but have worked very well. Chaos, war, violence, and corruption are not indications of failed institutions; they are ingrained in the very imagination of how nation-state politics works.

The above observation was made by the Ugandan theologian, Emmanuel Katongole. According to him, while the Christianity's social engagement in nation-building and social reconciliation in Africa have been focusing on providing strategies for revising, improving, or managing a failing institution, they have paid very little attention to the story of this institution: "*how* it works and *why* it works in the way it does." It is at this narrative level that a fresh conversation about the local church's social engagement in social reconciliation in a continent like Africa must take place.²⁸ This section of our study which has Africa as its context is about this new conversation, which recently, has started to occupy the writings of African theologians and other scholars alike. At the heart of this new conversation is a conviction that the course of social reconciliation and the role of Christianity in that regard must not ignore the fact that all politics are about stories and imagination. The new conversation for social reconciliation is about stories and imagination, specifically, the story about the regeneration of the people under the bondage of violent conflicts and tensions and the role of Christianity to that effect. The question is, what sort of difference, if any, can Christian story make in relation to culture-building in social reconciliation in a society soaked in violence?

Narrative Story and Imagination

Stories not only shape how we view reality but also how we respond to life and indeed the very sort of persons we become. In other words, we are how we imagine ourselves and how others imagine us. But this imagining does not take as an abstraction in the world of fantasy or as the

²⁷ We take Africa as our context in discussing this theme here.

²⁸ Cf. E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2011, 2.

unbounded free play of a mental faculty called the imagination. The idea that we can be anything we wish to be is one of the most insidious lies we can ever entertain. Who we are, and who we are capable of becoming, depends very much on the stories we tell, the stories we listen to, and the stories we live. Stories not only shape our values, aims, and goals; they define the range of what is desirable and what is possible. Reflecting on the role of stories in Christian social ethics and politics in their African context in general, Katongole notes:

Stories therefore, are not simply fictional narratives meant for our entertainment; stories are part of our social ecology. They are embedded in us and form the very heart of our cultural, economic, religious, and political worlds. This applies not only to individuals, but to institutions and even nations. That is why a notion like “Africa” names not so much a place, but a story – or set of stories about how people of the continent called Africa are located in the narrative that constitutes the modern world.²⁹

One of the mythical stories (moonlight stories) of *Obodo Iduu* (the original name of Igbo people of Nigeria), tells us how in those days the elders of the Iduu Kingdom, worried about the incessant suffering and death in the kingdom, decided to send two animals to God in his abode in heaven. The two animals were a running dog and slow moving gamelan. The dog, if it arrives first, was expected to ask God to stop people from suffering and dying on earth. The gamelan, on the other hand, if it arrives first, was expected to ask God to increase suffering and death for the people on earth. For the Iduu people, God only accepts the message of the first arrival among the two animals. God does not hear a late arrival message. In the thinking of the elders of the Iduu kingdom, the fast-running dog was expected to arrive first well ahead of the slow-moving gamelan. However, as the story goes, the dog disappointed the people, because it was distracted and forgot to focus on his journey and mission as it had to stop several times along the way to eat bones of death animals that were scattered along the roads. On the other hand, the slow-moving gamelan which diligently focused on its journey and mission arrived first before the dog and delivered its message of death and suffering in the kingdom of Iduu. When the dog eventually arrived, God rejected its message because He does not hear a message which arrives late.

No doubt, the Iduu people used this moonlight story – the imagery of a fast running dog and the slow moving gamelan, to explain how death entered the world. However, the underlying lesson of the folklore story is to tell us how one or even a nation, who had embarked on an important journey can go astray along the road and miss the mark if one is not very careful and focused.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o in one of his lectures points out that image resides in the memory and that the story we tell about ourselves, as it were, is a process of helping the people to draw their own image unfettered.³⁰ Images are very important. This is the reason why many people like looking at themselves in the mirror and like to take photos of themselves. In many African societies, the shadow is thought to carry the soul of a person. But in our context, we are talking of image of a people as a cultural, religious, philosophical, and even as physical, economic, political, moral and intellectual universe. In the conversation with African nation-states, for example, there is a tendency to show that this image resides in the memory. So also are dreams and hopes as well as the

²⁹ E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 2-3.

³⁰ N. THIONG’O, “Consciousness and African Renaissance: South Africa in the Black Imagination” (Memorial Lecture in Honour of Steve Biko), *New African*, no. 424, (December 2003), 51.

Africans' concept of life and struggle for survival.³¹ The question is how are we as a people remembered in our own consciousness and in the consciousness of the outside world?

All this implies that even though the stories we breathe and live may, on the surface, appear invisible, yet it does not mean that their hold on us is less powerful. On the contrary, to the extent that the stories which form our imagination remain invisible, they hold us more deeply in their grip. This is what makes the story of the institution of African nation-states even more powerful than has been acknowledged. According to Bievenu Mayemba, a Congolese Jesuit Priest, a story tells us about the past, supports us in the present, and prepares us for the future: "It involves the memory of the past and the memory of the future. ... It also involves a promise and tells us we should not move forward without looking back."³² Since our African memory is future-oriented despite John Mbiti's phenomenological interpretation of African concept of time,³³ we look back to the past, to the myth of our ancestors for the sake of the future and future generations. This is an essential task, especially in an African context that is a classical example of colonial dispossession of a people's cultural heritage. Chinua Achebe in his *magnus opus* novel, *Things Fall Apart*, captures very well this founding story of the crisis:

He has won our brother and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart.³⁴

The Nigerian Jesuit Priest and theologian, A.E. Orobator, recently, made a very significant theological re-appropriation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.³⁵ In fact, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* could serve as a starting point for the new conversation underway. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's contribution towards the socio-regeneration and culture-building in reconciliation in the African continent.

Furthermore, in the African context, story is about "yesterday", "today" and "tomorrow", at the same time. Such a double "regard" or "view" of the past and the future requires fidelity to the past, to our "dangerous" memories (J.B. Metz)³⁶ and our pathetic and heroic memories. It also involves creativity to make new paths into the future with hope and optimism. This creativity is what Jean-Marc Éla calls the "ethics of transgression" for the sake of epistemological rupture."³⁷ Such creativity led him to articulate theologically his pastoral experience with the Kirdi people of Tokombèrè village in northern Cameroun and turn it into a theological paradigm. He extrapolated from it a theology of revelation that takes seriously God's self-communication in history and a

³¹ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret, Kenya 2005, 181-182.

³² B. MAYEMBA, "The Promise of a New Generation of African Theologians: Reimagining African Theology with Fidelity and Creativity", in A.E. OROBATOR (ed.), *Theological Re-imagination: Conversations on Church, Religion, and Society in Africa*, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi 2014, 158.

³³ Cf. J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Heinemann, Oxford 1989, especially chapter 3.

³⁴ C. ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann, London 1958, v.

³⁵ Cf. A.E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2008.

³⁶ Cf. J.B. METZ, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, A Herder & Herder Book, New York 2007, especially chapter 6.

³⁷ See his article "The Memory of the African People and the Cross of Christ", in Y. TESFAI (ed.), *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1994, 17-35.

theology of salvation as liberation in the name of God's kingdom of peace and justice.³⁸ With that Éla was able to create a new story, an African story for pastoral praxis of social reconciliation. He triumphed over the warning of what the Nigerian author and novelist, Chimamanda Adichie calls "The Danger of a Single Story."³⁹

Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice – and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. According to her, the modern story of Africa is always replete with a single story. The African poverty is the single story. A single story of catastrophe: "In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to their *foreign counterparts*, in any way. No possibility of feeling more complex than pity. No possibility of a connection as human equals." But it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another, but to make it the definitive story of that person, the simplest way to do it is to tell the single story over and over again. A single story creates stereotypes. But one major problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. The single story robs people of dignity; it makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar. But assuming that you start the start from the bottom up, you will have a different story. Again, what the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories." Start the story with the failure of the African nation-states, for example, and not with the colonial creation of the African states, and you have an entirely different story. When we listen to another story, especially, from the bottom up, we regain what the American author Alice Walker calls "a kind of paradise."

The Gospel Story and *Evangelii Gaudium*

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis anchored his teaching on the Gospel teaching about the fundamental bond of human family, and developed a social teaching on reconciliation aimed at generating process of people-building. This principle is drawn from the parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. Matthew 13:24-30) which graphically illustrates an important aspect of evangelization: the enemy can intrude upon the kingdom and sow harm, but ultimately he is defeated by the goodness of the wheat. For Pope Francis, this principle calls for attention to the bigger picture, openness to suitable processes and concern for the long term. The Lord himself, during his earthly life, often warns his disciples that there were things they could not understand and that they would have to await the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:12-13).⁴⁰ For Pope Francis, if we look more closely at the biblical teaching on reconciliation, we find that the locus of this reconciliation of differences is within ourselves, in our own lives, ever threatened as they are by fragmentation and breakdown: "If hearts are shattered in thousands of pieces, it is not easy to create

³⁸ Cf. J.M. ÉLA, *African Cry*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1986; IDEM, *My Faith as an African*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1988, See also, B. MAYEMBA, "The Promise of a New Generation of African Theologians: Reimagining African Theology with Fidelity and Creativity," 158.

³⁹ See her talk given at the TED Global Conference, July 2009, Oxford, UK: www.TED.com, TC.N. ADICHIE, "The Danger of a Single Story" (Accessed on April 4, 2015).

⁴⁰ Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2013: 225 (Hereafter referred to as EG).

authentic peace in society.”⁴¹ In other words, the message of peace is not about negotiated settlement but rather the conviction that the unity brought by the spirit can harmonize every diversity:

It overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis. Diversity is a beautiful thing when it can constantly enter into a process of reconciliation and seal a sort of cultural covenant resulting in a “reconciled diversity.”⁴²

In his *Message for the 2015 World Day of Peace*, Pope Francis describes the emergent social tensions created by exclusion and discrimination of the poor and marginalized by the privileged minority, as the most excruciating form of the growing scourge of man’s exploitation by man, and therefore, a major source of modern conflicts and tensions. The Pope calls these social tensions they generate, new faces of slavery.⁴³ Here the Pope develops a thought that looks very close to the African philosophy of *relationality*, to which we have referred to before. It has often been claimed that where Descartes said, “I think, therefore, I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), the African would rather say: “I am related, therefore, I am” (*cognatus ergo sum*).⁴⁴ However, for Pope Francis, since we are by nature relational beings, meant to find fulfillment through interpersonal relationships inspired by justice and love, it is fundamental for human development that our dignity, freedom and autonomy be acknowledged and respected:

Tragically, the growing scourge of man’s exploitation by man gravely damages the life of communion and our calling to forge interpersonal relations marked by respect, justice and love. This abominable phenomenon, which leads to contempt for the fundamental rights of others and to the suppression of their freedom and dignity, takes many forms.⁴⁵

According to Pope Francis, the deep cause of the new forms of slavery today, as in the past, is rooted in the rejection of another person’s humanity. It is rooted in a notion of the human person which allows him or her to be treated as an object: “Whenever sin corrupts the human heart and distances us from our Creator and our neighbors, the latter are no longer regarded as beings of equal dignity, as brothers or sisters sharing a common humanity, but rather as objects.”⁴⁶ Whether by coercion or deception, or by physical or psychological duress, human persons created in the image and likeness of God are deprived of their freedom, sold and reduced to being the property of others. They are treated as means to an end. In addition, Pope Francis says there are other deep causes which help to explain contemporary forms of slavery. Among these, poverty ranks first; others are: underdevelopment and exclusion from social opportunities in the society. This means that poverty as we experience it today is a system’s problem, lack of political will on the part of those who wield power and control over the poor, to promote common good.

For Pope Francis, addressing these social issues, are of great importance for the future of humanity, because they call for the inescapable social dimensions of the Gospel message. The Pope

⁴¹ EG 229.

⁴² EG 230.

⁴³ Cf. FRANCIS, *Message for the 2015 World Day of Peace*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2014: 3.

⁴⁴ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, 70, foot note, n. 138.

⁴⁵ FRANCIS, *Message for the 2015 World day of Peace*, 1.

⁴⁶ FRANCIS, *Message for the 2015 World day of Peace*, 4.

encouraged all Christians to imbibe the social dimensions of the Gospel in addressing with courage this growing scourge of man's exploitation by man, by their words, attitudes and deeds. As we saw earlier on, this thought is developed in a more elaborate manner in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. Here, the Pope says that the principle drawn from the Gospel reminds us that:

Christ has made all things one in himself: heaven and earth, God and man, time and eternity, flesh and spirit, person and society. The sign of this unity and reconciliation of all things in him is peace. Christ "is our peace" (*Ephesians* 2:14). ... Peace is possible because the Lord has overcome the world and its constant conflict "by making peace through the blood of his cross" (*Colossians* 1:20).⁴⁷

Again, in this social teaching, Pope Francis takes as a point of departure the reality of the poor and the marginalized as one of the high points for today's missionary witness of Christian reconciliation process in the society.

The dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to renounce their privileges: When these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised. This means that demands involving the distribution of wealth, concern for the poor and human rights cannot be suppressed under the guise of creating a consensus on paper or a transient peace for a contented minority.⁴⁸

All this points to the importance of making the Gospel of Jesus Christ come alive in our day to challenge those situations of divisions, tensions, conflicts and violence in modern society. The world needs to be challenged through Gospel proclamation and witness of life with the story of Jesus. Here the Gospel story of the feeding of the crowds comes to mind. This story is told in varying detail by all four gospel writers:

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them: "They need not go away: you give them something to eat. ..." (*Matthew* 14:15-21).

Again, we meet Jesus resisting the attempt by his own disciples, to create a different image for his ministry: "Send the crowds away ...we have nothing here." A realistic and pragmatic response of the disciples that the crowds should go back to the villages where they had lived all their lives as marginalized people. But, Jesus has a different view. For Jesus, the problem will not be solved by sending the crowds back to the villages. Neither is it a question of lack of commitment by the crowds, which can be easily addressed through alms giving or moral and spiritual motivation. The problem has to do with *rethinking the existing social order* on which the society has been built – a social order that was never intended (or built from the bottom up) to respond to the basic social needs of the crowds but rather to serve the interest of a privileged minority and ruling class. This is a society the crowds are running away from because it has failed in its basic duty of providing security of lives and other social needs for the poor masses. This is what this episode is all about as Jesus' response in the story confirms: *There is no need to send the people*

⁴⁷ EG 229.

⁴⁸ EG 218.

away, “*You yourselves give them something to eat.*” Here, Jesus is inaugurating a new society that is people-oriented.

Commenting on this text, Katongole opines that the Gospel story of Jesus’ feeding of the crowds with five loaves and two fish is not only about the story of the miracle of “multiplication” or show of “compassion.” It is a drama of competing stories – the old order giving way to the new order inaugurated in Jesus. The story of scarcity (“we do not have enough”), gives way to the performance of Jesus that provides an alternative to it: Where there was scarcity, there is now not only enough (everyone had their fill) but superabundance. Instead of scattering of community as the disciples suggested, there is now Jesus gathering of the crowds (let people sit down); where there was a desert, we have now a lush field (people are ordered to sit down “on the grass”).⁴⁹ Is this not an invitation to rethink our social engagement and ministry amidst the situations of conflicts and violence in the modern society? The story of the miracle of “multiplication” of five loaves and two fish makes real the foundational narrative that is needed to usher in a different approach for our social engagement and ministry of reconciliation in today’s pluralistic and conflict-inflicted world.

5. Conclusion

In his inaugural Pastoral Letter, entitled: *The Scandal of a Fragmented Christianity*, Bishop Ugorji writes:

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) a gentle wind of change has been blowing over the relationship between us ... On account of this rather new development the attitude of suspicion, distrust, antagonism and hostility ... has been gradually yielding place to one of mutual understanding. ... In contrast, it would seem that this desirable wind of change is eluding us in this part of the world. ... Rather than mutual love and understanding growing among [*us*] in our land, there is growing suspicion, distrust, hatred, rivalry and hostility.⁵⁰

Though made in the context of ecumenical dialogue among Christians in Nigeria, the above statement of Bishop Ugorji has implications for our general discussion on social reconciliation and language learning discussed in this study. It underscores the pastoral commitment of Bishop Ugorji not only in the area of ecumenical dialogue, but also in social reconciliation and the church’s ministry of charity to the poor and the marginalized.⁵¹ More importantly, it shows that Bishop Ugorji’s pastoral commitments are in line with the teachings of the recent Popes on the new evangelization. Issues of social reconciliation, justice and peace are at the heart of the church’s teaching on the missionary activity of the new evangelization. For instance, speaking of the new evangelization in the African context, John Paul II said that, it (new evangelization) will aim at promoting reconciliation and true communion between ethnic and religious groups, favoring solidarity and equitable sharing of resources among the people, without undue ethnic or religious

⁴⁹ Cf. E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 168.

⁵⁰ L.I. UGORJI, *The Scandal of a Fragmented Christianity*, 4. Italics added.

⁵¹ Bishop Ugorji discusses extensively this last point in his Pastoral Letter, *That They May Have Life*, 1993.

considerations.⁵² Making the same point, Pope Benedict XVI, in the post-synodal exhortation, *Africae Munus*, says:

Since the vocation of all men and women is one, we must not lose our zest for the reconciliation of humanity with God through the mystery of our salvation in Christ. Our redemption is the reason for the confidence and the firmness of our hope, “by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be loved and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.”⁵³

In his prayer for peace, St. Francis of Assisi says: “Wherever wherever Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” The renowned spiritual writer, George Liddels, in the following words, speaks of hallmark of personal example and spiritual leadership as essential qualities for social reconciliation and world peace:

Give me a man of God – one man,
One mighty prophet of the Lord,
Whose heart is touched by heaven’s fire,
And I will give peace on earth,
Bought with a prayer and not a sword.⁵⁴

One of the fallacies of our modern time is the philosophy which says that peace among warring peoples or nations can be achieved through armament or wars. This philosophy of *Pax Romana* is wrong and contrary to the teaching of the Gospel. To the disciple who drew a sword and struck the ear of a servant of the high priest in a bid to protect Jesus from those who came to arrest him before the event of the Cross, Jesus said: “Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). This implies that peace which God gives is not the same with that which the world gives. The world tends to follow the logic of *Pax Romana* (use of arms and wars to achieve peace). The peace of Christ – *the Pax Christi* is of different order:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let them be afraid (John 14:27).

As Pope Francis says, peace of Christ calls for attention at bigger reality other than short term or limited results.⁵⁵ Indeed for Christians, peace of Christ is not conditioned by situations of conflicts, but attitude of the mind, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in human hearts – the working of the Spirit of God in our hearts; an interior relationship with God, and with fellow human beings and the entire created world that make way for the reign of God in our hearts. “Christ is our peace”: war or hatred of the other is a wall, a separation from peace of Christ. Peace is therefore, an independent, free choice of the mind guided by the Holy Spirit – interior peace that comes about through our

⁵² Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63.

⁵³ BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Africae Munus*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2011: 172; see also BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2007: 1.

⁵⁴ Quoted in J. OSWALD SANDERS, *Spiritual Leadership*, Moody Press, Chicago 1994, 17.

⁵⁵ CF. EG 224.

personal relationship with God, love of our fellow human beings and all God's creation.⁵⁶ If we want to remain at peace with God, with ourselves, others or the world, there is only one person we can rely upon, namely, the man, Jesus Christ. His gift of the Spirit is the source of our peace.

In other words, reconciliation is a gift of God. Like every other gift of our redemption, we have been invited to hope and work for the manifestation of God's reconciling mercy and peace in our lives and society.⁵⁷ Reconciliation also is a model of mission. As a model of mission, it is the form that the Good News of Jesus Christ most appropriately takes at this stage of history.⁵⁸ However, to say that reconciliation is a central and privileged aspect of mission does not mean that it is the only model. It is too bold to see it as the central model for mission.⁵⁹ But as it is becoming evident today, it is both an enduring biblical model and one which speaks to the world today, where deeply broken relationships are prominently being played out on both the local and international levels. When we ask ourselves what mission of God is and in what ways we are called to participate in it, we find ourselves talking about being mandated by the risen Lord to be bearers of his reconciling work in our societies.

All this throws more light on why we have chosen to honor Bishop Ugorji's Silver Jubilee celebration of his Episcopal Ordination with this short reflection on African palaver and language learning in social reconciliation. Through his social pastoral ministry in the areas of reconciliation, justice and peace, Bishop Ugorji is teaching us the relevance of promoting the values of the universal nature of the human family, respect of the dignity of the human person, and language learning in social reconciliation. In the teaching of Pope Francis, these are essential ingredients for the process of people-building, justice, peace and fraternity in modern society. They are issues of great importance in the context of those situations of tensions and conflicts in the present social order.

Furthermore, in discussing these issues under the title of African palaver model of reconciliation and language learning, this study wants to show that the pastoral engagement of Bishop Ugorji is centered at what is at the heart of the church's mission, namely, the recapitulation of all things in God through Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ Jesus Christ is the "language" of God the Father to the world. He is the Word through whom God the Father has spoken with humanity and the world as a whole. His, is a universal language valid for all peoples and cultures at all times and places. It is a unifying, dynamic language. This implies that all are invited to hear and speak the language of God through Jesus Christ. In this language is the salvation of humanity and the world.

Peaceful co-existence of people is uppermost in the biblical and the whole of Christian tradition. This is what Bishop Ugorji has been bearing to in his pastoral, first as a priest and more so as a Bishop in the past 25 years. There is no doubt that his pastoral ministry is animated by the

⁵⁶ Speaking on this fact in the context of human and environmental ecology, Bishop Ugorji writes: "Human beings are to preserve and care for the world because ... its existence determines the continued existence of humanity." L.I. UGORJI, *Care for Your Environment*, 14.

⁵⁷ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, 1: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2005.

⁵⁸ Cf. R.J. SCHREITER, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*; Idem. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*; Idem. *In Water and in Blood: A Spirituality of Solidarity and Hope*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2006.

⁵⁹ Cf. W.R. BURROWS, "Reconciling All in Christ: An Old New Paradigm for Mission", in *Mission Studies* 15(1998)1, 79-98.

⁶⁰ See his Pastoral Letter: L.I. UGORJI, *Jesus Christ the God-made-Man*, 1997.

Pauline theology and ministry of reconciliation as recorded in the New Testament. Paul tried to persuade others to join him in reflecting the meaning of their call to be ministers of reconciliation in concrete situations. Did Paul succeed in his ministry of reconciliation? It is clear from his letters that he sees reconciliation as one of the most challenging aspects of the apostolic ministry. We will also encounter obstacles and difficulties, but we must hold on to God's reconciling ministry given to us as a gift. This is the challenge of language learning in social reconciliation. It is also the challenge of our ministry of reconciliation today.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, provides us with a fitting conclusion for this chapter:

As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance. The same holds true for peoples as well. A metaphysical understanding of the relations between persons is therefore of great benefit for their development.⁶¹

⁶¹ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2009: 53.