

NARRATIVE STORY IN NATION-BUILDING AND THE NIGERIAN CHURCH¹

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Introduction – 1. Conversation through Narrative Story and Imagination – 2. The Nigerian Scene and Story – 3. The Story of Jesus and *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis – 4. Challenges and Prospects – Conclusion.

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 church'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 country like Nigeria, it does not explain why exaggerated ethnicity, tribal conflicts, poverty, corruption, religious intolerance and violence have been endemic to Nigeria'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 Nigeria and many other African nation-states in particular, have not been a failure, but have worked very well. Chaos, war, violence, and corruption are not indications of a failed institutions; they are ingrained in the very imagination of how nation-state politics works. In other words, while the church's social engagement in nation-building have been focussing 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." To paraphrase E. Katongole, the young African theologian from Uganda:² it is at this narrative level that a fresh conversation about the local church's social engagement in the Nigerian nation-state politics must take place. The present article is about this new conversation, which recently, has started to occupy the writings of African theologians and other scholars alike.

Introduction

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope St. John Paul II, put forward the following challenges to Christians and local churches of Africa:

Today I urge you (Africans) to look inside yourselves. Look to the riches of your own traditions, look to the faith which we are celebrating in this assembly. Here you will find genuine freedom - here you will find Christ who will lead you to the truth.³

¹ Originally, this article was published with the title "The Role of Story in Nation-Building: A Challenge to the Nigerian Local Church", in *Encounter* (Journal of African Life and Religion, Rome) 11(2015), 87-107.

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

³ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 1995: 48.

This call of the Pope to African Christians and local churches at the end of the 1994 Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa, is very cogent today, especially for the emerging Nigerian society. In this article the author intends to show how story-telling and imagination, which embody cultural values and ethos as well as vision of life, is one of the ways of responding to the Pope's invitation. This author will further argue that such approach is a step in the right direction towards social transformation and individual commitment. Understanding stories and imagination that lie beneath founding of nation-states and the ability to interpret them in the light of the story of Jesus Christ and in the light of *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis will aid the Church in Nigeria to rise to the demands of the Christian story in nation-building, make herself more relevant and be able to raise authentic witnesses from bottom up.

In developing this argument we shall adopt a narrative method of story-telling which, in the course of its application, may appear personal to the author but which nevertheless seeks to drive home the purpose of this essay. Our approach in that sense will be more practical than academic. We shall take our examples from our own living stories as well as those of the Nigerian nation-state. This is so because, the role of the local church in Nigeria's regeneration 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 Nigerian society inspired by the Gospel story and the memory of the Nigerian people themselves. In order to launch its mission of evangelization into the larger society, the local church must first of all be seen to be credible by the local people it strives to serve. This is one way to aim at culture-building and regeneration.

The article is divided into four major points as follows: 1) Conversation through narrative-story and imagination; 2) The Nigerian scene and story; 3) The story of Jesus and *Evangelii Gaudium* in the Nigerian context; 4) Challenges and prospects; and finally, conclusion.

1. Conversation through Narrative-Story and Imagination

At the heart of this article is a conviction that the course of social regeneration of Nigeria and the role of the local church in that regard must not ignore the fact that all politics are about stories and imagination. According to Katongole, it is at this narrative level of stories that a fresh conversation about the Christian social engagement in an African state like Nigeria must take

place.⁴ The new conversation for Nigeria is about stories and imagination, specifically, the story about the regeneration of the country and the role of the local church to that effect. The question is, what sort of difference, if any, can Christian story make in relation to Nigeria's regeneration and culture-building?

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 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.⁵

One of the mythical stories (moonlight stories) of *Obodo Iduu* (the original name of Igbo people), 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

⁴ Cf. E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 2.

⁵ E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 2-3.

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 African people to draw their own image unfettered.⁶ 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 Nigeria as a cultural, religious, philosophical, and even as physical, economic, political, moral and intellectual universe. In the conversation with Nigeria as a nation-state, there is a tendency to show that this image resides in the memory. So also are dreams and hopes as well as the Nigerians' concept of life and struggle for survival.⁷ The question is how are we as a people remembered in our own consciousness and in the consciousness of the outside world?

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 a nation-state like Nigeria even more powerful than has been acknowledged. Chancellor Williams, an African American scholar, in his seminal book, entitled, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, cites a passage from a Sumer Legend (an ancient Black People) that may best explain the point we have been trying to stress here: “‘What became of the Black People of Sumer?’ the traveller asked the old man, ‘for ancient records show that the people of Sumer were Black. What happened to them?’ ‘Ah’, the

⁶ 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.

⁷ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret 2005, 181-182.

old man sighed, ‘they lost their history, so they died.’ – A Sumer Legend”.⁸ Here a question easily suggests itself: “how many of Nigerian young generations today are conversant with the founding story of Nigeria as a nation-state – the founding stories of the nation’s institutions and social systems? How many Nigerians of today have a clear knowledge of the history of the evolution of Nigeria as a nation-state, and the role played by our past heroes in the birth of Nigerian nation (and also of the local church)? The present reality of Nigeria (as we shall discuss shortly) challenges us to dig deep into our past as a nation-state in order to rejuvenate it based on those values and ideals which our founding fathers and past heroes have laboured and died for.

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.”⁹ Since our African memory is future-oriented despite John Mbiti’s phenomenological interpretation of African concept of time,¹⁰ 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 like Nigeria that is a classical example of colonial dispossession of the continent’s cultural heritage. Chinua Achebe in his *magnus opus* novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which has its setting in Nigeria (Igboland), captures very well this colonial dispossession of our heritage as the founding story of the crisis we are living today in Nigeria and in indeed in the whole of Africa: “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”.¹¹ The Nigerian Jesuit Priest and theologian, A.E.Orobator, recently, made a very significant theological re-appropriation of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.¹² In fact, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* could serve as a starting point for diagnosing the maladies of the present-day Nigeria from the point of view of the power of the founding story and memory of Nigerian people and nation-state. Achebe’s novel, though published many years ago is yet to be read and taught to Nigerian children with a prophetic vision. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe’s contribution towards the socio-political and cultural regeneration of Nigeria and indeed the African continent. Could the present generation

⁸ C. WILLIAMS, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, Third World Press, Chicago 1987, 15.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Cf. J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Heinemann, Oxford 1989, especially chapter 3.

¹¹ C. ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart*, Heinemann, London 1958, v.

¹² Cf. A.E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2008.

of Nigerians take up Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and make it relevant to the emerging Nigerian society?

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)¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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 theology of salvation as liberation in the name of God's kingdom of peace and justice.¹⁵ With that Éla was able to create a new story, an African story in Christian theology and pastoral praxis. He triumphed over the warning of what the Nigerian author and novelist, Chimamanda Adichie calls “The Danger of a Single Story.” According to Chimamanda Adichie, 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. What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls “a balance of stories.” Start the story with the failure of the African nation-states, and not with the colonial creation of the African states, and you have an

¹³ Cf. J.B. METZ, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, A Herder & Herder Book, New York 2007, especially chapter 6.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Cf. J.M ÉLA, *African Cry*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1986; ID., *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.

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.”

One of the major factors which have brought about the rather inferior position of Africa and indeed Black Race in general in the present world scenario is absence of their founding stories in the school curriculum of different African states, including Nigeria. This is in addition to the poverty of documentation of our history especially of the remote past, in the evolution of the modern African nation-states. As Cardinal John Onaiyekan notes: While the Mesopotamians have left behind libraries of cuneiform tablets and Egyptians have their collections of hieroglyphics, much of sub-Saharan Africa has largely oral tradition. The result is that the rest of the world and even we ourselves tend to feel that nothing happened in our continent until others discovered us. This has an incalculable negative impact on our image, as well as on our ability to take our rightful place among the peoples of the world of today. It is in this regard that someone remarked that every old man who dies in Africa is like a library burnt down. This situation cannot be allowed to continue.¹⁶ Moreover, the history of modern Nigeria, and indeed of Christianity in the country, is still almost dependent on the works and records of the foreign historians and missionaries. Such works were more on what the others have done and are doing for us. In other words, new shift in academic trends in writing the story and history of Nigerian nation-state and Christianity is needed if we want to be serious with the efforts for the regeneration of the country. The founding story of Nigeria as a nation-state should also be included in the school curriculum, especially, at the primary and secondary school levels.

2. The Nigerian Scene and Story

Nigeria is one of most geographically beautiful places in the world, located at West African coast of the Atlantic Ocean. It is traversed from North to the South by the two great Rivers of Africa – Niger and Benue, with their endless tributaries, lakes, coasts, rolling hills, palm and cocoa rain forests and lush green valleys. Nigeria is also unique because of its proximity to sea coasts and rivers. Western civilization and Christianity reached Nigeria principally through water navigation of the Atlantic Ocean along Rivers Niger and Benue, and

¹⁶ Onaiyekan made the remark in his “Foreword” to the book of O. OGUNU (ed.), *The African Enchiridion*, EMI, Bologna 2005, xx.

their tributaries. The livelihood of people of Nigeria depend, to a large extent, on the waters flowing from the Atlantic Ocean into the hinterlands. It has abundant natural and mineral resources that few nations in the world can boast of. Many tropical crops are produced in abundance. The rivers, lakes and ponds contain almost all types of fresh water fishes. Its wild life is as varied as in the East African game reserve. Besides, it is blessed with such a lovely, temperate climate, especially in its Savannah and Rain Forest regions that the colonial European masters named it “Niger Area” (the heart of the Black Race). Nigeria has a population of almost 200 million people. It is blessed with very energetic and resourceful young population, educated men and women in various sectors of human endeavour. But the neglect and inaptitude of its successive leadership to harness these potentials meant that Nigeria is yet to begin the needed journey for the actualization of its destiny as a nation-state for its diverse people!

I remember in those days in the Primary School, during the morning assembly, we the children would line-up and our teachers would go round, meticulously, inspecting our teeth, finger nails and school uniform. They do this every morning and any pupil that was found wanting in cleanliness and hygiene – who come to the school untidy, without taking bath, brushing his or her teeth or keeping the finger nails neat – would be punished accordingly. For sports activities in the evening, the teachers would be there before everyone else so that nobody would contemplate coming late to the evening activities in the school. These were cultured teachers, forming pupils, society’s future in a cultured living. We arrived at the school from our different homes which were cultured homes that prepared their children early in the morning every day, in a cultured manner before taking them to the school and before going to their work places.

On Sundays, we begin each day very early with the Morning Prayer as in every other day of the week at home after which we would be taken to the church for the Mass. We would always meet our Parish Priest inside the church praying before the beginning of the Mass. He delivered always a very prepared down-to-earth homily. Each Sunday we looked forward to his homily. He was very respectful of everyone. In our Parish Priest, our disciplined homes met a disciplined Pastor and pulpit. Needless to add that our teachers were in the church also every Sunday morning and would take roll call of those present for the Sunday Mass and prayer. Sometimes, our teachers would take us for excursion to the Local Government Secretariat, the Town Post-Office, or to the National Electric Power Authority Office in our area. Some other

times, they would take us to visit Nigerian Police Station, Water Works, River Basin Authority, Radio and Television Stations, and so on. In all these places, we were warmly and gently received. Those that spoke to us inspired us with high hope for ourselves and the nation. In each of these excursion visits, we found that everyone in the work place was an expert in his or her work and surely, committed to it. We found the workers cultured people just as our teachers. There was culture of commitment, work-ethics, hard-work, cleanliness, honesty and love for the people and the nation among the leaders and workers in various sectors of the civil society and the church in those days in my early days in nursery and primary Schools in Nigeria. In all these things, however, the church was a major player in the nation's culture-building.

This brings us to another major aspect of Nigerian scene, namely, its multi-ethnic and multi-religious contours. I remember growing-up in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Nigeria in what looked then like serene and peaceful atmosphere in the early 1960s, before the outbreak of Nigeria-Biafra War. I was born in Eastern Nigeria. However, at the age of five, I began to live with my family in the Western Nigerian towns of Owo, Akure and Benin-City until the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War. After the War, during holidays in my high school days, I would visit members of my family living in the Northern Nigeria town of Jos, among others. This means that the beginning of my journey as a Nigerian was from East to the West and North of the country.

In the town of Owo, in Western Nigeria, we lived in a house owned by a Yoruba Moslem family. I mixed up very well with the kids of our neighbourhood, especially the children of our landlord at Owo. These were Moslems and I was the only Christian among them from the East of the country and an Igbo too. There were other children from other religious affiliations and ethnic groups. Among us nobody was thinking of our differences in religion, ethnic or language. Our different religious affiliations, ethnic and language belongings meant nothing for us kids when I was living with my family at this time of Nigeria's history in Western Nigeria. I quickly learnt Yoruba by association with other children. We children mixed up very well among ourselves that the parents of other kids and mine would often invite us kids for lunch together on Sundays. We played together and accompanied one another to markets as mates. During some of their Moslem feasts I recall how many times I joined the children of our landlord running round the streets and squares of the town in search of their family sheep they wanted to use for the feast. Our landlord had a son who was then in secondary school. Often this boy would return from school and instead of taking the soup his mother had kept for him, would approach me in

our apartment and request some soup from the one my family had prepared for me before going to work. I never said no.

This was my early experience as a Nigerian child. At that time, I personally thought that I'd been born into paradise. But I was mistaking: At age seven, when the Nigeria-Biafra War that lasted three years struck, Nigeria made me a refugee in my homeland! For three years in my own region which was the epic-centre of the hostilities, we could not attend school, receive medical treatment, house or cloth our bodies culturally, wash our bodies regularly or even move about, among others. Our life was in constant danger, trying to protect ourselves from the military bullets of the invading Army. By the time the war ended in 1970, about three million people, especially women and children, were reported to have died either through the bullets of the invading troops or the starvation policy put in place by the Nigerian Government against the people from the seceding region. From that time onwards, however, Nigeria as a nation-state has become anything but home not only to me but to all its citizens.

With the Civil War came institutionalization of the rule of Generals, corrupt politicians, perpetuating insecurity of lives and property, impoverishment of the masses – widening of the gap between the rich and poor, ethnic and religious acrimony and bigotry, among others, and paving way for the current Jihadists onslaught to the country, the use of system of divide and rule by those in power, polarization of old and young generations in social schemes, etc. The nation's two major religions, Christianity and Islam, have long polarised the country; Nigeria lives now under constant menace of the Jihadists who have decided to hold the entire country at ransom. Ruling elites manipulate this situation for personal interests, political and economic gains. What is evident is an abysmal total lack of love for the country and people by those in power.

As is the case in much of Africa, many of Nigeria's modern problems were rooted in the colonial past. However, after over 100 years of its amalgamation (1914-2014) – a marriage of convenience imposed by the British, which, in all intents and purposes, was meant to serve the colonial powers' continued economic interest in the country; and over fifty years of political independence, the Nigerian leadership should be able to address its internal problems. Nigeria as a nation-state of 100 years old should have reached the maturity to handle and manage in a creative manner conflicts that may arise as a result of its multi-ethnic and religious diversity. A plural nation-state such as Nigeria with its diversity of ethnic and religious groups and interests will not be entirely without conflict. Conflicts indicate there are tensions in the country and they

may be due to historical experiences of injustices, discrimination, misunderstanding and maladministration; compounded by the Nigeria's colonial burden, which is an epitome of the colonial artificial boundaries that gave birth to the present-day African nation-states. The nation-state should be able to intervene in such problematic situations, resolve conflicts and restore justice. What is important is not to try to avoid conflicts, but to solve them in creative ways without allowing the eruption of violence. This effort has as its background, the creation of relationships among the parties involved.¹⁷ In fact, manifestations of ethnic or even religious consciousness, is not bad in itself. There are certain peculiar habits of people we cannot condemn; such as dress, food, language, music, art, etc. Many of these manifestations are positive and desirable and confer richness on a national culture. But to prevent a fellow citizen from living or working anywhere in his/her country, or from participating in religious, social, political or economic life of the community in which he/she chooses to live, is another matter altogether: "Prejudice against "outsider" or "stranger" is an attitude one finds everywhere. But no modern state can lend its support to such prejudice without undermining its own progress and civilization."¹⁸

This is the scenario that the local church in Nigeria is called upon to address today in its missionary endeavours. In other words, the urgent need to rethink the local church's social role for Nigeria's regeneration arises not so much out of a ready-made solution or theories, but from what Jean-Marc Éla calls the "shock" of the gospel in Africa, the "co-existence of the gospel in Africa with the Veritable Empire of injustice and hunger." He captures various angles of this "shock" as he describes the frustration, the apparently meaningless existence, the extreme and paralyzing poverty, the violation of basic human rights, the colonial and neocolonial violence, the multinational exploitation, as well as hunger experienced by the people. It is this "rough ground" that, according to Éla, provides the unique context and challenge for Christianity in Africa today: "our practice of Christian faith faces a major challenge from African men and women who agonize over where their next meal is coming from."¹⁹ Recently, an important church leader from Europe visited Nigeria. Sharing his experience and impression of our people and local church after the visit, he made the following revealing remarks: "Nigerian Church is a very rich and hospitable Church, lively and joyous. But it is a *disunited Church, without identity*

¹⁷ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion: Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, 123.

¹⁸ C. ACHEBE, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Fourth Dimension, Enugu 1983, 7.

¹⁹ Cf. J.M. ÉLA, *My Faith as an African*, 87.

*and focus.*²⁰ This is very uncomplimentary remark on the Church in Nigeria. But it is a hard truth that we may from time to time need to be told in clear terms. The reason why we have made allusion to this uncomplimentary remark of a foreigner about Nigeria and its local church is to confirm that the task of creating a new cultural *ethos* and identity for the emerging Nigeria society and local church is an essential theological and ecclesiological requirement (though not exclusively). Here lies the challenge and expectations of Nigerian-nation and citizens from the local church and Christians of the country. The question now is what contribution can, a local church so depicted make towards the regeneration of the country in which it operates?

The growth of Christianity in Nigeria is manifest in the teeming number of the lay faithful that populate the various Christian churches in different parts of the country, and indeed, in many other countries where Nigerians live today. The vibrant Nigerian Christianity is also seen by the way their sons and daughters embrace vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life are promoted primarily by Christians living model lives in following Christ.²¹ There are however, some setbacks. For example, the paradoxes of double affiliation, the *Osu* caste scandal, tribalism, waning discipline of church leaders, under-use of the laity in the church, the challenges brought by vocations boom and inculturation as well as the eruption of charismatic and evangelical spirituality, and the upsurge of the healing Churches. For Catholicism to be meaningful and rewarding, it must confront the difficult realities of the local church and be able to offer reasonable solutions to them. It should also be able to make best out of the abundant resources and prospects of Nigerian Catholicism. Christian churches in Nigeria which used to be the beacon of nation's culture-building, especially through school and hospital apostolate, among others, are today, speedily changing contours. The mad-rush for healing and charismatic powers of many Christian pastors, including priests of the mainline churches, is now turning Christianity in Nigeria into the religion of workers and seekers of miracles. These powerful miracle workers have recently started to pose as diviners, visionaries and mouthpiece of "Oracles", almost in the old fashion of the medicine-men (*Dibia*) of the primal religions. People now consult them not only to seek miracles but to seek visions as well. The Catholic Church in Nigeria even is not spared of this phenomenon. In fact, it's is the most pathetic aspect of this reality. The Church's powerful "Priest-Healers" are

²⁰ Emphasis is mine.

²¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 25 March 1992: AAS 84(1992), 800-804: 38 (Hereafter referred to as PDV).

fast turning Catholicism into “Pentecostalism” and religion of workers and seekers of miracles. Nowadays, politicians and some well-placed men and women in the society have also become regular visitors of the miracle workers at their adoration and healing centres. In all, however, these people are not being directed on how to deepen their faith in the mystery of Jesus Christ and the sanctifying grace of the Cross or the sacraments and church’s traditional devotions. They are not taught either of how to come out of their misery and poverty situation. They simply go there for the usual prescription of miracle workers whom they see also as diviners or visionaries. These poor people are simply exploited for economic and other personal interests of the Priest-Healers and miracle workers. Again, the orderly exercise of charisms for the benefit of the community appears not to be uppermost in the minds of most of these “powerful” miracle workers. In addition, most healers appear stubborn, and bishops find it difficult at times to exercise supervisory ministry over the powerful “Priest-Healers.”²²

As we noted before, this challenge calls for a work of creativity and fidelity by the local church of Nigeria. This work of creativity and fidelity is one area the local church of Nigeria with its teeming educated priests, religious and the lay faithful must explore today. Above all, the local theologians themselves need to form a professional association and cooperate among themselves for exchange of information and expert advice to the local church in pastoral initiatives and creative programs. Through them such indigenous quasi-theological projects as the biblical movements, charismatic renewal activities, pious organizations, laity volunteer actions, indigenous liturgical hymn compositions, liturgical musical instrumentation, etc., have taken roots in Nigerian Catholicism. This means that the pastoral zeal of Nigerian clergy and religious must be matched with indigenous theological reflection and creative leadership. This effort has a single purpose, namely, creation of new story for the church’s participation in the regeneration of a New Nigeria. Defending mistakes is not a reliable strategy, because, in the long run, a failure to attend to these issues in the present may store up problems for the future. The most reliable strategy is sincere dialogue with our historical memory with a view to healing and reconciliation.²³ This is a spiritual mission of the local church for the sake of the larger society; a

²² There are instances however, where the powerful “Priest-Healers” are alleged to have gotten their ecclesiastical authorities compromised through material gifts. This explains why in some dioceses most of these “Priest-Healers” appeared to be out of control.

²³ Cf. F.A. OBORJI, *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2006, 204-205.

mission of “in-ward looking” for the local church, into its own inner-life, history and reasons for existence as a church in pluralistic society like Nigeria.

3. The Story of Jesus and *Evangelii Gaudium* in the Nigerian Context

Once more, the scenario of Nigeria today points to the importance of making the story and Gospel of Jesus Christ come alive in our day to confront the problem created by the failure of leadership, to challenge those situations of impoverishment, conflicts, violence and especially decadence of basic cultural values and *ethos* on which society depends for its survival. The story of the Nigerian nation-state needs to be challenged with the Gospel story of Jesus. In that respect, the first story of Jesus which I consider very crucial for our reflection in Nigerian context today is the story of the meeting of Jesus with the disciples of John the Baptist. It is about Jesus’ answer to the questions put to him by the emissaries of John the Baptist in the Gospel, the so called *Scandal of Jesus to John the Baptist*.²⁴ This is one passage of the Gospel that may help to drive home the task of culture-building and creating new *ethos* for the emerging New Nigeria as a missionary challenge for the local church. Matthew and Luke both tell us that one day John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Jesus’ answer was: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. *And blessed is he who is not scandalized of me* (Mt 11:2-6; Lk 7:18-23).” Here we meet the contrast between the preaching of Jesus and the Baptist. John calls for fruits of conversion in order to escape God’s condemnation; Jesus offers mercy and forgiveness so that conversion may follow. While John posits the question of conversion as a condition through which one could escape from the imminent eschatological judgment, Jesus, however, offers mercy and forgiveness as the new condition for the justice of God. In Jesus, we have a “new constitution”, so to say, the mercy of God; and it is on the basis of this mercy of God that we are saved and shall be judged. Jesus, in this context, wanted to tell John the Baptist that He (Jesus) came to establish a “new society”, the reign of the Kingdom of God, founded on God’s mercy, love and justice. While Jesus was changing the story of the existing order, John was still thinking in the logic of the old order for which he had preached for its conversion before the coming of the Messiah. In Jesus Christ, the Messiah has come and he is

²⁴ Cf. R. LATOURELLE, *The Miracles of Jesus and the Theology of Miracles*, Paulist Press, New York 1988, 45ff.

inaugurating a “new order”, a “new story”, founded on the mercy and justice of God through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ himself.

In other words, the “*scandal*” consists on the fact that Jesus’ style contrasts with mentality of the time, of the image the people have of the Messiah who is to come; an image of “a warrior messiah”, who is expected to wage war against their perceived enemy, and establish a fortified sovereignty in the style of the ancient kingdoms of Babylonians and the Romans. Jesus, however, refused to be photographed in that image. So, he answers the Baptist’s question as he does on other occasions, by referring the questioner to his actual messianic activity, to his *works*. The salvation foretold is at hand in Jesus and is offered to all, and not to Israel alone. Instead of vengeance and fire Jesus brings universal mercy. This is the inauguration of a new society in Jesus Christ. Again, the answer of Jesus to the Baptist’s question tells us that Jesus came to inaugurate a new society, built from bottom up, which is founded on mercy and justice of God. It is a society that is people-oriented and which invites us to be weary of allowing others to shape our identity and to know that the world consists of story-maps of unequal power. It is an invitation to embark on an exciting journey that reveals deep mysteries; that takes us back to the beginning of time to discover our very origins: How we came into being, who made us, who, was the source of all life. In our context, perhaps, Jesus’ answer to the Baptist’s question clearly articulates the reasons for the call towards “inventing the future” for Nigeria. It provides a concrete direction this task could take; even more important, it confirms how and why the local church in Nigeria is a gift suited to this task, not simply through a mere pastoral intervention or advocacy outreach, but as the determinative community or *polis* in which the task of inventing the future takes place.²⁵

The local church must uncover the underlying stories of the Bible and with them confront the underlying stories of the key social institutions in Nigeria that affect both the performance and the type of characters these institutions produce. Another Gospel story that explains more vividly this task of the local church is the miracle of the feeding of the crowds. 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). Here, we meet Jesus resisting the

²⁵ Cf. E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 104.

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 almsgiving 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 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”).²⁶ Is this not an invitation to rethink our social engagement and ministry amidst the situations of conflicts, violence and erosion of basic cultural values and ethos on which the society is founded? 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 in today’s multi-ethnic and multi- religious Nigeria already inflicted with a great challenge of leadership in almost all aspects of its socio-cultural, religious, political and economic reality. Within this context, the challenge that the local church faces is very concrete. Katongole summarizes the challenge as follow: “How can African human being attain a condition that will enable him and her escape misery and inequality, silence and oppression? If

²⁶ Cf. E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 168.

Christianity seeks to be anything more than an effort to swindle a mass of mystified blacks, the churches of Africa must all join to come to terms with this question”.²⁷

Nigeria and *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis discusses the emergent social tensions created by exclusion and discrimination of the poor and marginalized by the privileged minority, and describes it as the most excruciating form of the growing scourge of man’s exploitation by man. In addition, he anchored the challenge of mission and church’s commitment to the cause of peace in the world today to the call to proclaim the Gospel with joy. For Pope Francis, addressing these social issues is of great importance for the future of humanity, because they call for the inescapable social dimensions of the Gospel message. Christians have 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. Thus, Pope Francis draws from the Gospel teaching on the fundamental bond of human family, and develops a teaching on social regeneration of the society 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 the Pope, if we look more closely at the biblical teaching on social regeneration of the society, we find that the locus 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 authentic peace in society.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹

Again, “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

²⁷ Quoted in E. KATONGOLE, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 106.

²⁸ EG 229.

²⁹ EG 230.

contented minority”.³⁰ In other words, a realistic approach to the process of people-building – from bottom up. This process, no doubt, will help to lay a solid foundation for the new cultural *ethos* that Nigeria is in dire need today. It will help to minimize the frustrating issues that confront the poor masses as well as the middle class of the Nigerian nation-state; the frustration of being dehumanized often by the prevalent style of leadership and social system which are not people-oriented.

4. Challenges and Prospects

So far, we have shown that in the Nigerian context, the social challenge for the local church is that of participating in the regeneration of the nation. This calls for initiating a missionary spirituality for the bequeathing of a new story founded on the story of Jesus and history of the people of Nigeria for the sake of the nation’s future. In order to achieve this goal, I wish to propose here, the models of St. Augustine of Hippo and of St Benedict, the Abbot, for the spiritual renewal and the rebirth of the local church in view of its mission in the emerging Nigerian society.

After the fall of the Roman Empire and during the early establishment of the Christian religion in that empire, people needed new vision and spirituality for the emerging society. Augustine responded to this challenge with his *City of God* and other writings. The *City of God* provided the guidelines for the political organization of the emerging society and showed how the leadership – civil and ecclesial, should work for the well-being of all citizens and protect them from anything that might take them off the path of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ. The *City of God* developed a model of mission via monasticism; a completely different approach to mission was emerging that depended on modeling and persuasion and not by force. From the fifth century to the twelfth, Augustine’s monastic model was to inspire two main strains of monastic movement, the Celtic and the Benedictine. Benedict the Abbot, in particular, developed a set of rules that made the monastery not only a place of prayer and but also of agricultural and industrial revolutions for the people of Europe. The monastery became the centre of culture and civilization as well as of mission. In the midst of a world ruled by the love of self, the monastic communities were a visible sign and preliminary realization of a world

³⁰ EG 218.

ruled by the love of God. They were the places where the *City of God* could best be seen and experienced. This was how the church laid the foundation for the emergence of modern Europe.

In the African context, however, modern historians have argued that the triumph of the Ethiopian Church in the midst of the Muslim onslaught in the north and horn of Africa, especially between 640 and 1270, is largely as a result of the religious reform introduced by the two great monastic figures of that Church: St. Takla Haymanot (*ca.* 1215-1313) and Ewostatewos (Eustatius) (1273-1352). Before the Islamic conquest of North Africa, the Church of Ethiopia was a faithful daughter of the Coptic Church of St Athanasius of Alexandria in Egypt (328-367). The Ethiopian Church was a dependent Church in almost all aspects of Church life on the Coptic, including sending candidates for bishopric to the Patriarch of Alexandria to receive their Episcopal ordinations. However, when the Arabs conquered North Africa in 640, they took control of the trade route along the Red Sea – the Ethiopia’s life line with the Patriarchate of Alexandria and the outside world. Thus started the age-long isolation of the Ethiopian Church. Soon it was even dangerous to go to Alexandria and to look for a new *Abun* (bishop); so the country was often left without a bishop and for long periods. Even the Solomonic dynasty of Aksum eventually lost its power to the invading tribe until the restoration of this throne in 1270 (which has survived up to the reign of the late Emperor Haile Selassie).

Three factors worked together towards the triumph of Christianity in Ethiopia: the restoration of the Solomonic Kingdom, the reform of monasticism and the Ethiopian cultural renaissance. In a special way, the religious reform through the two strains of the Ethiopian monasticism (though not spared of some serious theological disputes) shared greatly in the religious revival of the country and the rebirth of the modern Ethiopia. It began with the evangelization of the provinces at the grassroots and the introduction of Christian marriage. The crowning activity of the monks was the production for the edification of the faithful of a rich literature, in which legends of saints played a leading role. Since then till our day, the Church of Ethiopia has been enjoying the status of a sister church (and no longer a daughter church of Alexandria), since it is a self-sufficient church in all respect. Some have argued that this experience created the problem of syncretism in the Ethiopian Church, but modern authors like to call this process the indigenization of Christianity.³¹

³¹ Cf. J. BAUR, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History 62 – 1992*, Paulines Publications-Africa, Nairobi 1994, 38-39.

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

Recently, a Congolese theologian, Kä Mana has proposed a model of reconstruction of Africa based on the theology of resurrection and salvation in Christ. He appeals to the model of the Egyptian mythology of *Isis* and *Osiris* – their struggles for life and rebuilding of existence, and of the model of the life-death-resurrection of Christ event. From these two distinct backgrounds, Kä Mana proposes a new society that passes from political ethics to Christological ethics and politics. The Christians of today are called to articulate in public domain, Jesus Christ as the horizon of our existence or as he before whom one is to reconstruct the humanity. The theology of reconstruction comes with the challenge of what to do between the logic of market economy and the logic of love as manifested by Christ. In this regard, the reconstruction of Africa must begin with the principles of structuring of our social consciousness: The dictatorships of the belly, of alienation and powerlessness, are the arena from which the struggle for the future must begin. What is at stake, is changing these realities and introducing a new way of thinking, to promote an “Africa” which is responsible for its own destiny. It is neither optimism nor pessimism but a desire for hope in the building of a new society.³²

In his own theology of reconstruction, E.E. Uzukwu, the frontline Nigerian African theologian, presents the boldness of the renewed Christian community as a way for the conversion and renewal of the whole society. He bases his model on the *concordia* theology of Cyprian of Carthage: the establishment of the community for the Kingdom of God through the witness of the faithful, especially by creating humane relational channels that make up the one

³² Cf. K. MANA, *Christians and Churches of Africa: Salvation in Christ and Building a New African Society*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2004, 21.

Church of Christ. In such a community, rank and privilege disappear; primitive sentiments of ethnocentrism or tribalism, religious bigotry do not determine the appointment of political leaders both in the civil and ecclesiastical sectors. It is the conversion of both the church and the civil leadership: to look with horror on the current reign of corruption and indiscipline in the public and private lives of the entire society; to fully put into practice that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female” because all “are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). For Uzukwu, this model will realize the Master’s beautiful, humane injunction of love, through which the one Church of Jesus Christ is recognized all over the world.³³

Therefore, in keeping with the purpose of this write-up, spiritual renewal and selfless leadership should be paramount in the pastoral concerns of the Church in Nigeria. The foundation for ushering in this dimension of church’s mission in Nigeria could be through educating the people (as the early missionaries did), and imbuing them with the knowledge for self-confidence that could inspire in them the needed desire for spiritual growth, selfless leadership, agricultural and industrial revolutions in the country.

5. Conclusion

A good number of Nigerians and indeed the whole of Africa, have decided for Christianity, and our local church has a greater role to play in creating a new culture and leadership. What Nigerian reality yearns for today is new cultural *ethos* and spirituality that will usher in a humane society of healthy and well cared people in our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation-state. The resource for doing this is the gospel message, the story of Jesus Christ, the Nigerian people and their culture. The call for nation’s regeneration and church’s social role, therefore, is a moment of rebirth of the Nigerian nation-state through the missionary and spiritual renewal of the local church – capable of inspiring true leadership that promote collective responsibility and wholesome development of people and society. The regeneration of Nigeria and victory of Christianity in the country is to be declared by the Nigerian people themselves, men and women, old and young alike. It is a hope for what could be called a historical resurrection.

³³ Cf. E.E. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1996, 152-153.