

Religious Education in Context: Evangelization of the Igbo People and Culture

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Abstract

The context, content and process, by which the Church brings the good news of Christ into all aspects of human life and endeavors, influencing its transformation from within, constitute what is known as evangelization. Evangelization is about people and their way of life, that is their culture. It is a process of religious education which seeks to transform adherents of the Christian faith, whether new or old members, into persons who are Christ-like. In this regard, this paper grapples with the question: 'what will it take to produce the kind of Christians, today and in the future, who are Christ-like in mentality, behavior, and attitudes?' Using case stories from the mission fields in conjunction with available literature, including various post-synodal apostolic exhortations, the paper proposes 'integral evangelization as inculturation,' coupled with a prophetic stance, which keeps Christ central to the entire process.

Key words: religious education, context, Igbo culture, evangelization, inculturation

1.0 Introduction

Religious education is a term given to education which is concerned with religion. It may refer to education provided by a church or religious organization, for instruction in doctrinal matters and faith practices or for education in various aspects of religion, but without explicitly religious or moral aims, say in a school or college. It is sometimes referred to as religious studies (Wikipedia, n.d.). Such religious education provided by the church is here termed evangelization. In more recent times, the need to align the content and process of religious education or evangelization with the context of people's lives has been advocated. This paper highlights the progress of such a line of thought regarding decolonization in the religious sphere with reference to the African context.

People and their culture are the subject of evangelization. By Culture is meant the way of life of a people. Culture guides a people's attitudes and perception of things around them, and underpins their value system. Closely allied to culture is religion which is an intimate fabric of a people's way of life; particularly so for the Igbos. Next to creation, culture is the matrix in which and through which God's historical self-manifestation has taken place, and continues to occur till today. This fact underlines the importance of culture and justifies its privileged focus in discourses focusing on religious education. The paper will first comment on the Igbo context; then by way of content, clarify the key terms and then use case stories from the mission fields to suggest a process of evangelization which pays attention to culture. A descriptive approach is followed and only where necessary is an analysis given.

The guiding question in this paper is: What will it take to produce the kind of Christians whose behaviours, mentality and attitudes are the result of sound moral judgments, based on decisions and choices which are in turn informed by internalized values of Jesus Christ? In other words, how can a new Igbo Christian people be formed and raised up whose emotions, intellect and psycho-motor operations are evangelized and re-evangelized; and who internalize the values of Christ to such an extent that their decisions and choices arise from considerations of the same values of Jesus Christ? Before proceeding, it will be helpful to get an overview of related concepts as well as how these fit into the church's overall agenda for mission.

2.0 Overview of related concepts

Over a long period of time, the church's self-understanding as well as its precise role in the world (that is its mission) has been gradually unfolding. This is evident in the Church's various post-synodal apostolic

exhortations in which the meaning of evangelization has continued to be enlarged from much earlier understandings of the term. For instance, as Paul VI (1975: 18) in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, “evangelizing means bringing the good news into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.” There a concern for the whole human person and the society.

2.1 Evangelization focusing on the human person and culture

The more recent post-synodal apostolic exhortations have acknowledged that evangelization is a complex process corresponding to the increasing complexity of the world context in which we live. Each successive document has also made the point that the focus of evangelization is the human person and their culture. For Paul VI,

What matters is to evangelize [human] culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots) ... always taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God (1975, 20).

From the 1994 document of the world bishops' synod on Africa, titled *Ecclesia in Africa*, promulgated by Pope John Paul in 1995, there emerge five dimensions of the church's agenda for mission: proclamation, social justice dialogue, inculturation and social communications. Furthermore, the document of the second African Synod held in 2008 and promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011, *Africae Munus*, affirmed many aspects of the first African synod and expanded its scope to focus more on reconciliation, justice and peace. As Nwosu (2013) points out, *Ecclesia in Africa* spelt out the identity of the Church in Africa as ‘the Family of God’ while *Africae Munus* is preoccupied with the role of this Church, the Church in Africa, ‘the Family of God,’ namely reconciliation, justice and peace.

2.2 Inculturation

In the wake of the attainment of independence in many African countries, there issued incessant calls for the ‘contextualization,’ ‘concretization,’ ‘accommodation,’ ‘adaptation,’ ‘indigenization’ ‘localization,’ ‘incarnation’ or ‘Africanisation’ of the church and theology in Africa (Magesa, 1991: 19). All these terms are suggestive of the aspirations to have Christian faith communicated in language and symbols that are consonant with and affirmative of the African identity and sensibilities. Over time, the word inculturation became accepted as carrying these expectations; but before then it took several steps.

Okure (1993) alluded to how successive popes since John XXIII had called on Africans to become evangelizers of their own people. Even Pope Paul VI joined in the chorus, paying glowing tribute to ‘traditional African values’ in his 1967 message to the people of Africa and, two years later in 1969, urging African bishops assembled in Kampala, Uganda, to construct ‘an African Christianity,’ suited to their people's worldview.

Magesa (1991) gave a picture of various factors that contributed to the emergence of the concept; pointing out the growing awareness of the effects of colonization on the African psyche in this way:

The role of the mass media (as more and more people acquired access to radio and television and an increasing number of African theologians, priests and religious became familiar with recent findings in depth psychology and sociology (Magesa, 1991: 19).

All this, coupled with a gradual shift in mentality of some “foreign missionaries in Africa and overseas, and even some theologians and theologies abroad, [who] began to shift their views perceptibly on non-European, and specifically African, cultures” all contributed in one way or the other (Magesa, 1991: 19). “In almost every significant quarter of the church, people began to realize that there was need to reconsider and re-evaluate previous assumptions concerning the African peoples and their worldview” (Magesa, 1991: 19).

John Paul II (1995) defined inculturation as “the incarnation of the gospel in native culture and also the introduction of the culture into the life of the church” (as cited in Uchem 2001, 149). He also referred to it as “a movement towards full evangelization” (John Paul II, 62).

Inculturation is a movement towards full evangelization. It seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit (John Paul II, 62).

Following a similar trend of thought, Gaggawala (1999, 9) saw inculturation as “the process by which the gospel/the Church is inserted in a given cultural context.” Therefore, inculturation can be regarded as the process of bringing into harmony a particular cultural expression with the good news of Jesus. In this light (Paul VI, 1975, 63) had this to say:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs, their symbols; if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.

Thus, what Pope Paul VI said about evangelization has implications for inculturation in the Igbo context.

For the Church it is a question not only of preaching the gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the gospel, [humanity's] criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the word of God and the plan of salvation (Paul VI, 1975, 19).

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice and peace, *Africae Munus*, gave much attention to inculturation, thus elevating its status with magisterial backing and taking it beyond the level of the personal efforts of individual theologians.

The gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the gospel proclaims is lived by [human beings] who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures (Paul VI, 1975, 20).

Similarly, Benedict XVI had this to say;

The Church's initiatives for a positive appreciation and safeguarding of African cultures are well known. It is very important that this continue, at a time when the intermingling of peoples, while a source of enrichment, often weakens cultures and societies. The identity of African communities is at stake in these intercultural encounters (Benedict XVI, 2011, 36-38).

In this connection, one cannot help thinking of the near demise of the Igbo language and culture due to neglect by many who take more pride in adopting and promoting other people's languages and cultures than their own. Such people will do well to heed the following admonitions from the same document:

It is imperative therefore to make a commitment to transmit the values that the Creator has instilled in the hearts of Africans since the dawn of time. These have served as a matrix for fashioning societies marked by a degree of harmony, since they embody traditional formulae for peaceful coexistence. These positive elements therefore need to be emphasized, lit up from within (cf. Jn 8:12), so that Christians may truly receive the message of Christ, and in this way God's light may shine before the eyes of all. Then, seeing the good deeds of Christians, men and women will be able to give glory to “the Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16). (Benedict XVI, 2011, 36-38).

The heightened awareness and appreciation of the African culture in relation to the Christian faith has continued to grow. Hence the following opinions. “The challenge African culture brings to the church today is a demand for respect for the African worldview and values contained in the culture of the African peoples” (Magesa, 1991: 19).

From a slightly different angle, Obiefuna and Kanu (2013: 213) referred to inculturation as a tool for the reconciliation of cultures.

From this perspective, inculturation becomes a process that plies the pattern of the 'Word made-flesh', which would involve the gospel taking life and flesh in the beliefs of people who welcome Christ and the values of the gospel. Just as Christ became man so as to win salvation for all, the gospel must become 'culture' so as to win the heart of 'local people'.

Accordingly for Walligo (1986: 11), inculturation means the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his gospel of salvation ever more understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. "It is the reformulation of Christian life and doctrine into the very thought patterns of each people ... the continuous endeavour to make Christianity 'truly feel at home' in the cultures of each people."

Looking at the foregoing passages, evangelization is clearly linked to people and culture. The quest for a recognition and integration of the African culture in the expression of the Christian faith in the African context, captioned inculturation, ultimately gave rise to what is known as the new evangelization. It was first voiced by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of his various trips to Africa and other continents. What then is the new evangelization?

2.3 The new evangelization

At the turn of the new millennium, John Paul II began referring to a "new evangelization," of which there are three parts: personal and spiritual renewal, witnessing to others, and the transformation of society and culture, including pro-life activism, social justice work, service to the poor and marginalized, and engagement in politics or even the arts (New evangelization, 2013: 54). The pontiff spoke about evangelization that is "new in zeal, new in expressions and new in methods."

"The new evangelization will thus aim at building up the Church as Family, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups ..." (Benedict XVI, 2011, 63).

2.4 The Igbo context and the products of evangelization

The thought of evangelization of people and culture in the Igbo context evokes notions of the Igbo people and their culture. As such, it includes a consideration of the people's way of life, language, customs, traditions, belief systems, values, moral universe, economy, governance; coming into contact with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The notion of people is also reminiscent of the teeming youth, adult women and men of all age groups as well as the children, including the unborn, whose presence is often unmistakable at holy mass. One also thinks of the many, who are not able to be in church because they are house-bound through sickness, old age or disability; and people who keep away because of misconceptions, ignorance, fear, shame of one kind or another or because of scandal. To all these different kinds of people, the offering of the good news of Christ is directed. Pope Paul VI (1975) put it this way:

The purpose of evangelization is therefore precisely ... interior change, and if it had to be expressed in one sentence the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs (Paul VI, 1975, 18).

Review of available literature on the quality of Christianity in the Igbo context reveals that in spite of the great numbers of people seen in various churches, the Christian faith among the African Christians in general and Igbo Christians in particular is very shallow. Ezenweke and Madu (2007) captured it succinctly in this way:

Christianity in Africa has no problem with the number of those that call themselves Christians. The Christian Churches are filled to the brim on Sundays and other holy days of obligations. Our markets are empty on such days observed as Sundays by some Christian denominations. The situation is such that Christianity has only succeeded in producing nominal Christians but

lack Christians indeed, who are quite convinced of the teachings of the Church. The fruits many of these Christians produce are quite unsatisfactory (265)

Ezenweke and Madu (2007) went further to say:

One of the greatest worries among the contemporary writers and scholars on the nature and success of Christianity in Africa is the problem of its depths. Simply put, to what extent has Christianity penetrated the minds of believers in Africa, especially in Igbo land? In other words, how effective are the Christian or the Western mainline Churches in socializing Igbo people or in producing Igbo Christians who are Christians of convictions, even in the hours of temptations?

Ezenweke and Madu (2007) were therefore right when they questioned the quality of the products of initial and present evangelization in the Igbo context. Similarly, Obiefuna and Kanu (2013) underscored the problem of evangelization in the Igbo context in these words.

The Christian churches in Africa are growing tremendously, and churches are breaking out virtually every day and metamorphosing into new ones. The vocation to priestly and religious life is abundant. The number of pastors, evangelists and prophets can hardly be quantified. About ninety nine percent of the clergy men and women now in Africa are Africans. In spite of the evident success of missionary work in Africa seen in the teeming population of Africans who have embraced Christianity, there is an evident lack of depth in the faith and commitment of converts (213).

3.0 Problem identification and analysis

It is a well known fact that the primary evangelizers of the Igbo people did not bother with inculturation – that is incarnating of the gospel message in the Igbo people’s thought categories, language and symbols. Nor did the evangelization procedure take into account Igbo people’s values and moral universe. On the contrary, African culture in general, and the Igbo language and culture included, were degraded. At the same time the culture of the initial evangelizers was presented as superior. In this way, Igbos learned to despise their cultural heritage. Considering that being grounded in one’s language and culture affirms one’s sense of identity, Igbo Christians could be said to be suffering from a sense of identity diffusion.

Regardless the fact that the current church personnel has been almost a hundred percent indigenous, for over forty years since the forced departure of the expatriate missionaries, the situation has not changed substantially, that is beyond singing, clapping and dancing. What (Magesa, 1991: 20) said about the state of inculturation elsewhere in Africa is equally applicable to the Igbo context.

In those areas that are most significant for inculturation (apart from the rather superficial displays of [animal] skins or local textiles, wooden chalices, drums or handclapping in liturgies) no real inculturation [has been] attempted, for example, with regard to Eucharistic prayers, communal prayers in general, the species of the Eucharist, the liturgical calendar, forms of ministry, ecclesiastical organization, forms of sacramental rites, catechesis etc.

That is to say with regard to inculturation, African missionaries to African have not fared better either despite all the lamentations of the cultural neglect by the foreign ones.

Different scholars have expressed differing views as to the cause of lack of progress in inculturation beyond the superficial level of adaptation to deeper levels, including inculturation as incarnation of values as in a two-way process. Obiefuna and Kanu (2013: 230-232) identify, among others, the problem of language, skepticism, distrust of things African and fear of syncretism. However, for Magesa (1991: 20), the major problem with inculturation in Africa includes what he called ‘over-supervision’ and the ‘attitude of tutelage’ from Rome.

The most fundamental and comprehensive problem between African culture and the church is attitudinal - considering the African church today as a young church. The most significant manifestation and summary of this attitude is the African church accepting and internalizing this conception and description of itself. Even though the church may appear to be self-

governing and self-propagating, these appearances will not be radical realities. At bottom, the African Church will remain adolescent, not yet adult, not yet mature, not yet self-sufficient, and unable in the final analysis, to manage its own home. It cannot be, and cannot be allowed to be, fully itself in the essential areas of the expression of religious belief and in organization. Superior western knowledge, leading often to ridicule, refutation and the requirement of conformity under the theological and institutional tutelage of others will remain substantially the same. Only the semantics and adornments will be different (Magesa, 1991: 20).

In other words, he accuses Church leaders of hypocrisy regarding the charge to inculturate the Christian faith. As it appears, the move toward genuine inculturation can only come from a courageous Church leader who is ready to take a few risks in experimenting with some initiatives. Others might follow suit in due course.

4.0 The challenge of inculturation in Igbo land

For a better appreciation of the challenge of inculturation in Igbo land, culture can be reviewed under its basic components such as: rituals, festivals/pleasure/entertainment and social order regarding gender and caste. In the Igbo as other African traditional religious life, rituals mark every aspect such as rites of passage to mark birth, puberty/maturity, marriage, title-taking, sickness at any stage of life, death and burial. Others celebrate festivals, seasons and the daily rhythms of life (Uchem, 2002).

Birth: *I ru nye nwata mmanu n'onu; i te nzu; i b'aha* [naming ceremonies].

i be nwa ugwu [circumscision, female infibulation]; *ikuputa nwata n'obi*

Puberty: Initiation of young women: ritual confinement and fattening [*iru mgbede or i no na mkpu*]; Initiation of young men into mmanwu cult [*ima mmanwu*]; outing ceremony after the period of ritual confinement [*i pu ahia, i pu n'utu*]; Ceremony of first clothing for young men and women - [*I wa-akwa*]

Maturity/marriage: *I ma-ogu; I kpa aku nwanyi or I bu aku nwanyi* [paying the bride price/bride wealth; *i gba nkwu nwanyi or iri aku nwanyi* [the festivity of the traditional marriage ceremony].

Title-taking: *ozo, lolo, mgba, ichie, nze, eze* [chieftaincy]

Sickness at any stage of life: attended to with the relevant propitiatory sacrifices and ritual counseling services, including *i je na dibia*.

Death: burial, funeral, mourning, inheritance and widowhood rites.

Seasonal festivals and rituals such as: *i ri ji or i wa ji [or i tensi]; ahia ji oku; i me udara; I hu Chi; Ara-n'umu [or Ara l'oma]* etc

Note on-going rituals and symbols such as the kolanut, *Ikenga, Ofo-na-Ogu; Ogirisi; Omu nkwu; nzu; uhie; edo* etc.

Pleasure/entertainment: various art forms, music, dance, food, wrestling, and masquerade cults.

The lure of such cults as masquerades eg mmanwu, odo, ori-okpa, ekpe [Cross River] is still very strong among Christians.

It is against this backdrop that the clamour for inculturation of the Christian message takes place. That is to say that these components of Igbo culture outlined above should be officially incorporated into the life of Christian Igbos. The reason for this comment is that most of these practices were condemned by the expatriate missionaries and remained banned long after almost all church leadership posts were filled by indigenous church leaders. One of the most contentious areas is that of title-taking such as *ozo, lolo, mgba, ichie, nze, eze*. For those who are desirous to give full expression to their Igbo identity through ozo title-taking Gbuji, A.O. (2007), it does not help matters that some diocese allow it while others forbid it.

At any rate, this paper is particularly concerned with aspects of culture that are often not given attention; those elements that put some members of a community at a disadvantage while promoting the advantage of others. Often those at an advantage try to ensure a continuity of such situations by claiming that it is their culture and therefore it is unchangeable. The paper holds the position that only aspects of culture which promote the human dignity of all are worth maintaining.

4.1 The new evangelization as inculturation

Of particular interest to this paper is inculturation with a view to transforming human relationships particularly in the areas where cultural prescriptions conflict with human dignity. To this end, the following elements are considered prerequisites: the centrality of Christ in inculturation, the power of credible witnessing, the power of language and symbols, the necessity of a deep spirituality and small Christian communities (SCC).

The SCC, also known as ecclesial basic communities, was extolled by John Paul II. (1995a) as a veritable tool for evangelization.

A rapidly growing phenomenon in the young churches ... which are proving to be good centers for Christian formation and missionary outreach. These are groups of Christians who, at the level of the family or in a similarly restricted setting, come together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment. These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a "civilization of love." (John Paul II, 1995a, 51).

Indeed the SCCs provide settings in which much creativity can take place by way of inculturating the gospel in the concrete life of Christian. However, there is need for a guideline.

4.2 A method for inculturation

It has been observed that not every aspect of culture is in harmony with the gospel of Christ. Some cultural beliefs and practices are positive or neutral, and should be encouraged. Others are outright oppressive to some members of the society and should be dropped or amended. However, on the issue of culture the trouble with some Christians is that of setting Jesus aside and following the dictates of culture wholesale, as if it is the gospel. Therefore, in order to promote inculturation, there is need for a method. The suggested guideline is to sift the cultures with a sense of social justice, and incarnating the gospel of Christ in people and in their society. Here are a few selected biblical and contemporary extra-biblical stories which provide such guidance and inspiration.

On the subject of inculturation with respect to unwholesome aspects of African cultures, Uchem (2002: 193-204) made the following remarks:

In light of the sinful/unjust social structures built into all human societies [and Igbo Christianity is not immune to these], and of a general tendency to tolerate and rationalize oppression of women by proof-texts from the Bible, it is important to find a way of determining what is good news vis-a-vis the received Christian message with its cultural coatings from the Judaic, Greek, Roman and Igbo cultures.

Similarly, with reference to portions of the scriptures which contradict the good news, she also offers the following reflections:

Since sacred Scriptures, both New and Old Testaments, are tinged with cultural elements (See *Dei Verbum*, no. 12, Vatican II Documents), which also happen to be largely male-centered and patriarchal in favouring men and disadvantaging women, there is need to process them in order to get at the real good news of God contained in them. The suggested criterion for determining what is good news and therefore liberating is what is liberating and life-giving for all, women and men alike. In this sense of inculturation, all customs, traditions and cultures, whether sacred or secular, biblical or otherwise, are to be sifted in the light of Christ's Good News, liberating all women and men from all oppressive situations (Uchem, 2002: 193-204).

5.0 What if Jesus had been born into your particular culture?

This was a question posed by one of the authors in relation to Igbo customs that victimized women during a parish-based adult religious education session in a parish at Onitsha. The priest had generously welcomed the message of gender sensitivity during all the four masses on the Sunday morning. He went further to invite her to lead the Sunday evening bible instruction; according to him, "so as to give the people maximum opportunity to interact with her." The focus of the bible study was the gospel story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5: 24-34). Through a step-by-step unraveling of the text in relation to Jewish customs about women, the people were led into a deeper appreciation of the full significance of Jesus' prophetic action on behalf of that Jewish woman, and of all women of all cultures, and of all times. At the end, the people were asked to mention all the taboos that target women in their particular culture and they did. Then they were asked: "What if Jesus had been born into your culture, what do you think he would have done with all the discriminatory laws and taboos against women in your culture?" What would have been his attitude to those cultures and traditions? The overwhelming

majority said: “He would have done to them what he had done to the Hebrew culture by disregarding their taboos which discriminated against women.” A few however insisted that Jesus would have respected their traditions against women. At that point it was time for benediction and evening mass. Some of the people remarked that no one had ever taught them the bible in such a manner that challenged them deeply. One man in particular called for continuity to the discussions. “Next Sunday,” he said, “the bible class should begin at 3.00 p.m so that we will have enough time.” However, the facilitator had to remind them that she only came on invitation and that they would need to discuss with their priest for another possibility.

That episode was definitely an example of how inculturation of values can take place with reference to different aspects of the Igbo culture and in fact, the rest of African cultures.

4.5 Authentic inculturation requires a deep Spirituality

Since the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of inculturation as of evangelization, there is need for a deep spirituality as a pre-condition for inculturation. Consider this example. A few years ago, the BBC ran a television series on a documentary film, entitled *the Monastery*. It highlighted an experiment in spirituality where a couple of men from various walks of life volunteered for the experiment and filmed for the duration of the agreed period of, I think about a month, during which they were exposed to monastic practice. It comprised a daily regimen of meditation, silence, reading and reflection; with an assigned guide or companion. They were instructed with a simple rule of not going out, ‘no booze,’ no smoking or night club. All this was with a view to determining whether and to what extent any of them might have a spiritual experience.

One or two could not take the monastic discipline the whole time. They sneaked out into town; but the rest persevered, with amazing differing yet similar results. Something fundamental happened to them. Some of them reported having a spiritual experience. But what we are more interested in is the country wide impact that the television report on that BBC experiment in spirituality had on people in the UK. It stimulated in people a new quest for spiritual re-awakening. One of the authors witnessed the offshoot of this while in Oxford in the fall of 2010, in the springing up of what some people call ‘missional communities’ all over England. Clusters of people came together periodically to pray and to seek to act together on some social issues. Usually the key person or founding figure might have gone to a monastery and spent a week or two and then returned to form a support community in their neighbourhood.

What can be learned from this phenomenon is that when we hear of empty pews in the west, it is only one side of the story. What we do not hear is what drives them away from church and what makes certain parish churches in the same west fill up to the brim with parishioners of all age groups. There is something about the quality of worship, especially the sermon and the music. Personal safety can also be a factor: “Is someone going to attack somebody, insult them or humiliate them, all in the name of sermon?” These are some of the considerations that sometimes influence where people might choose to go or not go and worship.

Small Christian communities

At the mention of small Christian communities [SCCs], the natural reaction of some may be: “but we have them already. What of our zones, our outstations and religious societies”? At any rate, may be the SCCs already exist; may be not. It is not certain; but what is known is that there are certain things that mark out the SCCs worldwide, and make them very effective forum for evangelization. For instance, they are composed of people living in the same neighbourhood who come together regularly, for gospel sharing/shared prayer and common action. When the people come together for their weekly meetings, they talk about their situation and their sufferings. Then they turn to the bible for inspiration and then they act with a view to changing their situation for the better. Sometimes too, they begin with the word of God and then they go on to search for the problems in their situation or context. As they reflect together on a scripture passage, they are thereby energized to undertake specific social actions for justice and to solve particular problems, which affect their lives negatively as a community. It may be the lack of some basic amenities or infrastructures. Or some injustice they are suffering. The inspiration from their gospel sharing and prayers pull the people into action and they solve their problems corporately.

In contrast, some of the existing structures such as zones, outstations and religious societies in the Nigerian context which some mistake take for SCCs tend to be limited to spiritual exercises or welfare. The SCCs go beyond that to include concerted social and political actions for justice and transformation. The SCCs very much echo the concerns of the catholic social teachings as expressed in *Justice in the World* (1971, 6).

Action on behalf of social justice promotes change in institutions, policies and systems. Social justice is central to being Catholic. It is not new, nor is it optional. It is an essential ... dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, of, in other words, the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

The rationale for small Christian communities

The following is the rationale for establishing and fostering small Christian communities. Through small Christian communities, Christians of our time try to recapture something of the spirit of the early Christian communities. In them, people get a sense of belonging as they care for other people and are cared for as well. They derive mutual support in the effort to end injustice. As mentioned earlier, this new upsurge has come from places like South America, East Africa, South Africa and other places where people have struggled and are still struggling to overcome injustices such as not having rights to vote or to own land – all of these being residues of past and ongoing neo-slavery and racism. Thus, the formation of SCCs will surely serve to address the socio-economic and political problems in our context.

Conclusion

Evangelization is another word for religious education conducted in a particular life context. This paper has focused on the evangelization of the Igbo people; that is the religious education of the Igbo People with reference to their Culture; from the missionary days up till the present. The paper considered the quality of religious education required to produce the kind of Christians whose behaviours, mentality and attitudes are the result of sound moral judgments, based on decisions and choices which are in turn informed by internalized values of Jesus Christ? As a way forward, inculturation is recommended with a view to transforming human relationships particularly where cultural prescriptions conflict with human dignity. To achieve this quality of Christianity, keeping Christ central, having credible witnesses, noting the power of language and symbols, maintaining a deep spirituality and having small Christian communities are indispensable.

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