

REVISITING INCULTURATION THEOLOGY: THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In clarifying the major issues that theologians need to investigate for the pastoral development of the Church in Nigeria, this article revisits the theology of inculturation. The essay presents a condensed historical excursus on inculturation, highlighting its roots in sacred scripture and the early Church. The essay shows how the Second Vatican Council's teaching sparked inculturation's acceptance in African Catholicism and its subsequent growth in Nigeria. This historical trajectory serves as the foundation for looking at inculturation tendencies among Nigerian theologians and putting forward an agenda for them. According to the essay, inculturation theology is an important theological task of particular churches that must be upheld through the vocation of theologian.

Keywords: Inculturation, Culture, Faith, Church, Africa.

1. Introduction

For the early centuries of Roman Catholicism, theological discourse focused on presenting studies on a universal scope with little or no attention to how context shaped theology. Theologians seldom interrogated how their social construct and cultural milieu informed their theologizing. Contemporary theologians contend that theologizing is shaped by culture, and thus theology is contextual.¹ The significance of culture in theologizing has birthed diverse theologies, including those particular to Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. As a contextual theology, African theology can be understood as “the systematic and scientific presentation or elaboration of the Christian faith according to

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¹Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 1-2.

***OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations
for the Church in Nigeria***

the needs and mentality of the African peoples.”² African theology involves a triadic dynamic exchange: from the faith to the contexts, from the contexts to the faith, and the intersections between the faith and the contexts. Hence, according to Henry Okullu, African theology is:

When we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to those spontaneously uttered prayers before people go to bed. We should go to the schools, to the frontiers where traditional religions meet with Christianity. We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in independent churches. ...Everywhere in Africa things are happening. Christians are talking, singing, preaching, writing, arguing, praying, discussing. Can it be that all this is an empty show? It is impossible. This then is African theology.³

The dominant approaches to African theology are inculturation and liberation.⁴ Inculturation deals with the encounter between the Christian faith and a specific cultural context, while liberation theology focuses on the encounter between faith and the African politico-socioeconomic

²African theology is also described as “the theology of the people by the people and for the people of Africa.” Charles Nyamati, “Contemporary African Christologies: Assessment and Practical Suggestion,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 63.

³ Henry Okullu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1974), 54.

⁴ Other approaches to Africa theology include Black theology, theology of reconciliation and construction, African women theology. See Joseph Ogonnaya, “African Liberative Theologies,” in *Introducing Liberative Theologies*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 26-46.

context.⁵ This classification distinguishes the contexts/aims and sources/methods of African theology.⁶

This article revisits the African inculturation theology, intending to set a theological and pastoral agenda for future theologians and missionaries in Nigeria. The article is structured into four parts. The first presents an abridged historical trajectory of inculturation theology, showing its roots in sacred scripture and the life of the early Church. In this section, attention is given to the significance of the Second Vatican Council in the development of inculturation theology. The second examines the role of culture in preserving the integrity and fostering authentic inculturation. The third focuses on the trends of inculturation in the Church in Nigeria and articulates key aspects of inculturation for Nigerian theologians and missionaries. The essay concludes with an invitation to theologians to cast into the depth of inculturation theology.

2. Culture as Mediating the Christian Faith

The incarnation of Jesus Christ remains a significant event in the understanding of the theology of inculturation—“the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), and “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).⁷ According to Pope Francis, “we would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural”⁸. The incarnation was a revelation of God’s self-communication through the Jewish culture. In turn, the Jewish culture played a universal role of mediation in the expression and communication of God’s love for

⁵ Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 69.

⁶ See Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), vi; Ogonnaya, “African Liberative Theologies,” 33.

⁷ Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 6.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium* 117.

humanity. Alyward Shorter notes that Christ's earthly ministry would have been impossible without a particular culture.⁹ Culture remains an indispensable agency for the propagation of the Christian faith.

In Roman Catholicism, the role of culture in mediating the faith was greatly influenced by the dominant culture, which contributed to a monocultural view of Christianity.¹⁰ Karl Rahner explains that this mono-culturality envisioned the Church as "an export firm which exported a European religion as a commodity it did not really want to change but sent throughout the world together with the rest of the culture and civilization it considered superior."¹¹ Rahner divides the expression of this ecclesial self-identity into three historical epochs. He writes: "theologically speaking there are three great epochs in Church history, of which the third has only begun and made itself observable at Vatican II."¹² Let us briefly look at these epochs.

3. The Ministry of Jesus Christ

In the first epoch, Christ proclaimed the good news and exercised his ministry through the Jewish culture. He used Jewish cultural expressions to speak of God's Kingdom. Jesus lived in the Jewish culture and used its worldview, norms, ethos, language, and other modes of expression to proclaim the Gospel. "Jesus was a Jew, immersed in his culture, observing the law and customs of his times, yet critical of some of the Jewish leaders."¹³ Jesus spoke Aramaic, read the Torah, and worshipped at the synagogue (Luke 4:16). He used local parables and images to communicate his good news of God's kingdom (Luke 4:16-21, 8:4-8). Jesus also transformed the Passover into the celebration of the Eucharist (Mark 14:12-26). Christ chose a particular culture to communicate the

⁹ Alyward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 80.

¹⁰ Cyril Orji, *Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 138.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40, no. 4 (1979): 717.

¹² Karl Rahner, "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," 721.

¹³ Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 6.

divine plan of salvation to humanity.¹⁴ After his passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Christ commissioned his apostles, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:18). Faithful to this mandate, the apostles proclaimed the gospel to Jewish converts. The immediate consequence was new Christian believers retained certain Jewish rites, such as the observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws.¹⁵

4. Proclamation of the Gospel to Non-Jewish Communities

The second epoch began with the proclamation of the Gospel to non-Jewish communities, whose cultures were primarily Greco-Roman. It led to a Gentile-Christianity, in which Greco-Roman philosophy and culture were appropriated in presenting the Christian faith. An important ecclesial gathering in this regard was the Council of Jerusalem (49AD) to debate whether circumcision was necessary for salvation. The apostles decided not to lay on the Gentile converts in the Old Testament circumcision laws (Acts 15). In Athens, for example, Paul used Greek philosophy in explaining the resurrection of Christ (Acts 17).

Some Church Fathers, including Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas appropriated Greek philosophy in the exposition of the doctrines of the Church and theological discourse. Indeed, Pope Gregory the Great was instrumental in initiating the mission to England during the sixth century. For example, the Pope sent a letter to Abbot Mellitus, encouraging missionaries to adopt a cultural interaction and accommodation approach in the evangelization of the people.¹⁶ This papal appeal was the norm for early missionaries who often viewed non-Christian cultures as pagan. For example, during the missionary expansion between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, European missionaries sent to India and the Americas assumed some air of

¹⁴Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 122.

¹⁵Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” 721.

¹⁶ See Gregory the Great, “Letter to Abbot Mellitus,” in *The Christian Faith*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Depius (New York: Alba House, 1982), no. 1102.

OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations for the Church in Nigeria

superiority over the people and their culture.¹⁷ However, there were exceptions to the prevailing missionary practice of disregarding local cultures.

Notable examples are the Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), who adapted the culture in evangelizing the people of China and India.¹⁸ In 1659, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (*Propaganda Fide*) issued a series of directives and instructions over the ensuing decades. For example, in the Congregation's Instruction, *Ad Exteros* directed missionaries, especially to India thus: "Do not regard it as your task and do not bring any pressure, to bear on the people to change their manners, customs, or way of life unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. Can anyone think of anything more absurd than to transport France, Italy or Spain or some other European country to China? Bring them your faith, not your country."¹⁹

Africa was not spared from the avalanche of cultural degradation and condemnation of African Traditional Religions. Early European missionaries to Africa had little latitude for openness to other cultures other than the European. In their zeal to win souls for Christ, according to Anthony Akinwale, "indigenous traditions were erroneously considered to be wholly and entirely 'pagan' and diabolic."²⁰ The faith, tinted with Euro-cultural sensibilities, was assimilated and propagated by early missionaries to Africa and other parts of the world. The Church in Nigeria was a beneficiary of this Eurocentric Christianity when the early

¹⁷Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 34.

¹⁸Justin Vettukallel, *Intercultural Hermeneutics: Significance of Interculturation as an Approach to Doing Theology in an Age of Globalization* (Karala: Ruhalya Publications, 2015), 20.

¹⁹See Collectanea S. Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, *Rome 1893 Collectanea S. Congregationis Propaganda Fide* 2 vols, Rome, (1907): 130-141; Valentine Ugochukwu Iheanacho, *Historical Trajectories of Catholicism in Africa: From Catholicae Ecclesiae to Ecclesia in Africa* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021), 68.

²⁰Anthony Akinwale, "A Brief Commentary on Catholic Theological Perspectives in Africa," *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 5 (2015): 6.

missionaries (mainly from Portugal, Spain, and Italy) arrived on Nigerian shores between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

At the dawn of the First Vatican Council (1869-70), with the fear of the influence of Modernism and Enlightenment, the interaction between the Church and culture began to wean. The emphasis was more on faith and reason. The indispensability of culture in evangelization received a big boost with the publication of the encyclical *Maximum Illud* in 1919 by Pope Benedict XV, who was concerned about missionary methods adopted in mission lands and called for the indigenization of the faith and the training of the local clergy.²¹ The early missionaries to Africa were equally encouraged to forget their European cultures and thought categories and become Africans to Africans.²² Charles Lavigerie, the founder of the White Fathers, for example, instructed their first missionaries to Uganda and Tanzania (1878-79) to assimilate into the cultures they were to evangelise. They were to learn the local language and adapt to their customs, while making the doctrine simple, intelligible, and free of European philosophy.²³

Essential ecclesial documents that on the role of culture in evangelization included, *Rerum Ecclesiae* (On Promoting the Sacred Missions) by Pope Pius XI in 1926; *Evangelii Praecones* (On Promoting Catholic Missions) by Pius XII in 1951 and Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Princeps Pastorum* (On the Missions, Native Clergy, and Lay Participation) of 1959. Worthy of note is Pope Pius XII missiological principle that "not the Gospel on being introduced into any new land destroy or extinguish whatever its people possess that is naturally good, just or beautiful. For the Church... does not act like one who recklessly cuts down and uproots

²¹See Pope Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, https://www.vatican.va/romancuria/congregations/cevang/documents/rc_con_cevang_20100524_profile_en.html (accessed 20 December 2022), nos. 8, 17.

²² John Mary Waliggo, "Making a Church that is Truly African," in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency* (Kampala: Paulines Publications Africa, 1986), 15.

²³ See Charles Lavigerie *Instructions du Cardinal Lavierie* (1878-9), Algiers (1927) cited in Waliggo, "Making a Church that is Truly African," 16.

OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations for the Church in Nigeria

a thriving forest. No, she grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that it may bear a crop of more delicious fruit.”²⁴

In the same affinity is the 1945 publication of *La philosophie bantoue* (*Bantu Philosophy*) by the Belgian missionary, Placide Temples. In this book, Temples critiqued the ‘tabula rasa’ approach commonly adopted by many missionaries in evangelising the African continent. He described African culture as a “coherent system with the vital force (*la force vitale*) as its core and leading value.”²⁵ However, a defining moment came with the publication of a compendium of essays titled “*Les prêtres noirs s’interrogent*” by some African scholars in Paris in 1956.²⁶ These theologians interrogated the extent to which westernised theological categories truly reflected and responded to the African context. One of the contributors, Vincent Mulago, reflected on whether the evangelization of Africa was rooted in African milieu, or it was an expression of the Europeanisation of Africa.²⁷ These questions serve to inspire the birthing of African theology. Subsequently, many African theologians, especially Francophone, began to reflect on different approaches to African theology.²⁸

5. The Convocation of the Second Vatican Council

The third period, according to Rahner, emerged with the convocation of the Second Vatican Council. This period inaugurated the Church’s self-reflective consciousness as a “World Church,” and the recognition of the Church’s mutual relations with other cultures. The result was the Church becoming more diverse in the expression and celebration of the Christian

²⁴Pope Pius XII, *Evangelii Paecones* https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_02061951_evangelii-praecones.html (accessed December 23, 2022), no. 56.

²⁵ See Placide Temples, *Bantu Philosophy* (Orlando: HBC Publishing, 2020); Marco Moerschbacher, “Inculturation and Mission in Africa—The Apostolic Letter Maximus Illud and the Way Towards an African Theology of Mission,” *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2020), 46.

²⁶ See A. Abble et al., eds., *Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent* (Paris: LesÉditions du Cerf, 1956).

²⁷ Abble, *Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent*, 12.

²⁸ Akinwale, “A Brief Commentary on Catholic Theological Perspectives in Africa,” 8-11.

faith and sacraments.²⁹ The Council acknowledged the rich diversity of cultures within global Catholicism and the significance of the Church in being attentive to changes in cultural contexts. The Council states that the Church has the mandate to proclaim the Gospel in light of the cultural milieu of diverse peoples. Yet the Church, while missionary by nature, “is not tied exclusively or indissolubly to any race or nation, to any particular way of life, ancient or modern.” Instead, the Church grows “in communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves.”³⁰

Though the term ‘inculturation’ did not make it into the conciliar documents, the Council calls for the incarnation of the Gospel within cultures. The analogy of the incarnation is expressed as uncovering the seeds of the Word that lie hidden among those to be evangelized.³¹ However, inculturation has become a theological metaphor for explaining how the Gospel takes flesh in various cultures. In 1975, Pope Paul VI, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, called for fidelity to the integrity of the Gospel. He writes: “Evangelization loses much of its force if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.”³²

At the close of Vatican II, inculturation gradually gain currency with theologians, “who saw it an ally against the consequences of cultural alienation and guarantee of a genuinely African Christianity.”³³ It was

²⁹ Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” 717.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, in *Vatican II—Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 2007), nos. 17, 58. Subsequent citation of Vatican II documents is from this text.

³¹ Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*; nos. 10, 11; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 68.

³² Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 63.

³³ Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, xi.

OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations for the Church in Nigeria

time to invest in a truly African Catholicism, one that is not removed from the historical constructs and cultural sensibilities of the continent. In 1969, Pope Paul VI made the first pastoral visit of a pope to Africa. At a meeting of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in Kampala, Uganda, in clear terms, the Pope declared:

The expression, that is, the language and the mode of manifesting the one faith, may be manifold....From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favored by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense, you may, and you must, have an African Christianity.³⁴

A few years earlier, in 1967, Pope Paul VI issued an Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Terrarum*. In this document, he recognised the positive values in African cultures and challenges Africans to become missionaries to Africa.³⁵ A notable pastoral response of the Church in Africa to this papal appeal was the renewed research into inculturation theology. A significant fruit was the Zairean Rite for the Church in the Congo (DRC). Under the leadership of Cardinal Malula of Kinshasa, the Holy See approved a way of celebrating the Eucharist steeped in Congolese culture.³⁶ Another response to the Pope's invitation can be seen in the establishment of indigenous missionary societies and religious congregations. These orders were founded for the sole purpose of evangelizing Africa. For example, the Apostles of Jesus founded by Bishop Sixtus Mazzoldi in 1968; the Congregation of the Daughters of

³⁴ Pope Paul VI, "Eucharistic Celebration at the Conclusion of the Symposium Organized by the Bishops of Africa," https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/homilies/1969/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19690731.html (accessed 20 December, 2021).

³⁵ See Pope Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), nos. 7-14.

³⁶ See Conference Episcopale du Zaire, *Missel Romain pour les Dioceses du Zaire* (Kinshasa: Editions du Secretariat General, 1989).

Mary Mother of Mercy founded by Bishop Anthony Nwedo in 1961; the Missionary Society of St. Paul founded by Cardinal Dominic Ekandem in 1977; the Via Christi Society founded by Rev. Fr. Angus Fraser, CSSp in 1990. These were creative responses of the Church in Africa to the missionary mandate of the Church. Furthermore, inculturation received greater attention at the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994. A significant fruit of this synod's deliberation on inculturation was the adoption of the model of the "Church as Family of God" to express the self-understanding and mission of the Church in Africa.³⁷ Given these theological and pastoral responses to the call for inculturation in Africa, some theological questions arise. How has the Church in Nigeria fared since the close of the Second Vatican Council? How do theologians contribute to the Church's call to incarnate the faith in particular cultures? While we will return to these questions in the proceeding sections, it is vital to examine the understanding of culture considering a theology of inculturation.

6. Between Culture and Inculturation

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) offers a classical definition of theology: *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).³⁸ Since human understanding requires interpretation, theologizing involves interpretation, and interpretation is done in the context of the interpreter. Doing theology consists of the interpretation of the faith within a particular culture and relating the faith to the realities of that culture. Since theologizing prioritizes context, the *locus theologicus* extends from Scripture and Tradition, to include culture.³⁹ Since culture is an integral aspect of context, theologizing as contextual includes inculturation. Drawing from Bernard Lonergan, if the theologian adopts a classicist notion of culture, as *terminus a quo* for theologizing, the *terminus ad quem* would be a theology for all cultures. But if the *terminus a quo*

³⁷ First African Synod of Bishop, *Final Message of the People of God of the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), no. 24.

³⁸ St. Anselm, *Proslogium; Monologium*, trans. Sidney Norton Deane (La Sella, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1951), 33, 178.

³⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 3.

OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations for the Church in Nigeria

works from an empiricist concept of culture, then there will be theology for every culture.⁴⁰ What makes theology precisely contextual is the diversity of cultures.

Since inculturation expresses the interaction between the Christian faith and a particular culture, it is important to define culture. However, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of culture. Peter Schineller describes culture as, “a set of symbols, stories (myths), and norms of conduct that orient a society or group cognitively, effectively, and behaviorally to the world in which it lives.”⁴¹ In the same vein, Clifford Geertz views culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system or inherited conceptions; expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life.”⁴² Marcello Azevedo articulates an understanding of culture that integrates the functionality and dynamics of human reality, as

a set of meanings, values, and patterns which underlies the perceptible phenomena of concrete society which they are recognizable phenomena on the level of social practice (acts, ways of proceeding, tools, techniques, costumes and habits, forms and traditions), or whether they are carriers of signs, symbols, meaning and representations, conceptions, and feelings that consciously pass from generation to generation and are kept as they are or transformed by people as the expression of human reality.⁴³

Culture can be understood, from these definitions, as offering a horizon for understanding the dynamics that influence and guide human life,

⁴⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 300-302.

⁴¹ Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 23.

⁴² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

⁴³ Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, “Inculturation and the Challenges of Modernity,” in *Inculturation Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, ed. Arij A. Roest Crolius (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Center for Culture and Religion, 1982), 8.

religious expression, thought patterns and actions. The interplay of these dynamics when faith meets culture is the focus of inculturation. The appropriation of inculturation in theology is attributed to Joseph Masson, the first to speak of *catholicisme enculturé* (inculturated Catholicism) to describe the insertion of the Gospel within a particular culture.⁴⁴ Previously, cultural anthropological terms such as adaptation and indigenization were used at certain points in church history, though considered inadequate to express the encounter between the Gospel and culture.⁴⁵

Inculturation describes the process by which the faith comes to bear upon a particular culture, context, or situation. Other processes that express the different means through which the faith takes root in culture include Africanization, localisation, translation, contextualization, enculturation, and acculturation.⁴⁶ Distinctively, the 28th superior general of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe (1907-91), described inculturation as:

the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation.’⁴⁷

Arrupe’s definition of inculturation as a process goes back to Christ’s incarnation, which then becomes a model that captures the encounter between the Christian faith and culture. The Church in Nigeria, at its First Pastoral Congress in 2022, equally adopted the incarnation model of inculturation, rooted in this text from St. Paul: “Though he was in the form of God, he did not seem equality with God as something to be

⁴⁴ Joseph Masson, “L’eglise ouverte sur le monde,” *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 84 (1962): 1038.

⁴⁵ Augustine Ogar, “Faith, Culture and Inculturation vis-à-vis the Challenges of Contextualization,” *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 3 (2013), 92.

⁴⁶For the meaning of these terms see Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 7, 10; Schineller, *Handbook on Inculturation*, 14-22.

⁴⁷ See Schineller *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 6.

grasped at. Rather he emptied himself, and took the form of a slave” (Phil 2:6). The Church in Nigeria, therefore, understand inculturation as: welcoming our Emmanuel (God-with-us), God made flesh, and giving him a really dwelling place in our cultures. Inculturation had to do with the rooting of the gospel message in the culture of a people. We understand inculturation in the framework of the theology of incarnation. This means that inculturation is not simply adaptation. It goes deeper into ways of understanding the faith and living it out in practical experience.⁴⁸

The Church in Nigeria acknowledges that adaptation is inadequate to capture the encounter between faith and culture. The term incarnation seems not to account for the mutual exchange that occurs when faith meets a specific culture. Pope John Paul II states that inculturation is a two-way process, comprising “‘on the one hand, the ultimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity’ and, on the other hand, ‘the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.’”⁴⁹

Given the above definitions of inculturation, it presupposes that only the Christian faith that affects and encounters a particular culture. There is no ground for the mutual encounter and mutual exchange that should occur between the faith and the culture. An authentic inculturation leads to mutual enrichment of both the Christian faith and the specific cultural context, and so bringing about a “new creation.”

7. Focus and Trends of Inculturation in Nigeria

With more than 20 million Catholics spread across about 250 ethnic groups, inculturation remains a fundamental task for the Church in Nigeria. As stated earlier, the Catholic bishops of Nigeria consider inculturation since “A faith that is not fully inculturated is a faith that is

⁴⁸ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *The Church in Nigeria Family of God on Mission* (Lagos: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2004), no. 178.

⁴⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (Vatican City: Libreria Vaticana Editrice, 1995), no. 59.

not truly received.”⁵⁰ The gospel has to be incarnated in cultures, without giving into syncretism. Particular churches have made strides in inculcating the faith. A significant aspect is the translation of the Bible and some liturgical texts into local languages. More needs to be done to translate the Catholic Catechism, the sacramentary, the Lectionary, and Rites of each sacrament.⁵¹ Other aspects include the celebration of the liturgy in local languages, the composition of sacred music in indigenous languages, and liturgical dance (for example, the Idoma *Ogrinya* thanksgiving dance) and the use of liturgical vestments sewn with African fabric.⁵² In the same vein, there has been inculturation of the naming ritual among the Yoruba, the *Ebira* marriage rite (Lokoja Diocese), the patterns of reconciliation (*igba ndu*—ritual covenanting) to settle conflicts in Igbo communities, and the *edeere uman* (the blessing of the mother after childbirth) in Ikot Ekpene Diocese.⁵³

From the perspective of theological development, Anthony Akinwale identifies two trends of inculturation in Nigeria, to which I have added a third. The first group is the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, and the Spiritan International School of Theology (SIST), Enugu. This school is “enormously interested in inculturation theology and the social, political and economic problems of Nigeria.”⁵⁴ The second school is the Dominican Institute of Theology (DIT), Ibadan, which focuses on the “retrieval of apostolic tradition in Scripture, the Church Fathers, and Thomas Aquinas, and uses what is retrieved in the confrontation with Nigerian and African question.”⁵⁵ The DIT embarks

⁵⁰ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *The Church in Nigeria Family of God on Mission*, no. 179.

⁵¹ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *The Church in Nigeria Family of God on Mission*, no. 185.

⁵² See Joseph Ogbonnaya, “The Church in Africa: Salt of the Earth?,” in *The Church as Salt and Light: Path to an Ecclesiology of Abundant Life*, ed. Stan Chul Ilo et al (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwicks Publication, 2011), 83-84.

⁵³ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *The Church in Nigeria Family of God on Mission*, no. 193.

⁵⁴ Akinwale, “A Brief Commentary on Catholic Theological Perspectives in Africa,” 18.

⁵⁵ Akinwale, “A Brief Commentary on Catholic Theological Perspectives in Africa,” 18.

OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations for the Church in Nigeria

on theological research in response to biblical literalism, the spread of the prosperity gospel, and religious fundamentalism. The third is The National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul, Abuja. This is the first missiological seminary in Nigeria. The MSP seminary furthers an intellectual tradition of inculturation theology grounded in the creativity of retrieving the tradition and magisterial teachings considering the sign of the times in mission fields. Through the apostolate of the pen, MSP theologians are examining the changing context of mission to articulate appropriate theological and pastoral responses for missionaries in evangelization.⁵⁶ The emergence of these schools demonstrates how inculturation theology has continued to develop in Nigeria, addressing significant aspect of Catholic theology. For example, while the CIWA and SIST could be described as focusing primarily on contextual and liberation theologies, the DIT represents doctrinal/systematic explication.⁵⁷ In my estimation, volumes of theological work on inculturation exist, but little is done to transform them into forms useful for Nigeria's mission and pastoral ministries. This is where the MSP seminary is bridging the gap between tradition and mission praxis and providing tools for pastoral agents and missionaries. Contributing to the

⁵⁶ Some of the works emerging from the MSP school include: Raymond Olusesan Aina, *Overcoming Toxic Emotions: A Christian Ethical Framework for Restorative Peacebuilding* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2021); Emmanuel-Mary Mbam, "African Theologies in dialogue with the West," in *Handbook of African Catholicism*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2021), 647-666; Clement Kanu, *Decolonizing God-Talk: Divine Fluidity and a Spatial Ecclesiology for West Africa* (Moldova: Lambert Press, 2021); Idara Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation in African Catholicism: Between Vatican Council II and African Synod II* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwicks, 2020); Valentine Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking: Prospects of a Local Church in Mission Territories* (Starbrcken: Scholar Press, 2015); Daniel Ihunnia "The Identity of the Christian Community in Africa: A Study of the Pastoral Methods in the Thoughts of P.A. Kalilombe"(STD Thesis submitted to the Pontifical Urban University, Rome), Dzungwenen Tyohemba, *A Theological Inquiry into the Relevance of African Christianity to the Suffering People of God in Nigeria* (STB Thesis submitted to The National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul, Abuja, 2013).

⁵⁷ Akinwale, "A Brief Commentary on Catholic Theological Perspectives in Africa," 17-18.

emergence of these trends of inculturation is the establishment of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN), founded in 1985 and the indispensable research of the first generation of Nigerian contextual theologians including, Cardinal John Onaiyekan, Justin Ukpong, Teresa Okure, Manus Ukachukwu, and Theophilus Okere.

8. Theological Agenda for Theologians and Missionaries

In setting a theological agenda for inculturation, it is essential to note that the geographical entity called Nigeria is not a monolithic culture. The diversity of culture presupposes the diversity of agenda for inculturation. Rather setting an agenda must be viewed as a modest attempt to read the “signs of the times” and identify uncharted paths for the Church in Nigeria. In a 2015 letter to the theological faculty of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, Pope Francis writes: “the good theologian, like the good shepherds, smells of the people of the road and, with their reflection, pours oil and wine on the wounds of humankind.”⁵⁸ The Pope states that teaching and studying theology demand living on the frontiers, where faith meets the needs of the people.⁵⁹ What follows are two theological considerations for theologians and missionaries as they continue the tasks of inculturation.

The first consideration is the inculturation of doctrines. The DIT has shown remarkable progress in a patristic-inculturation approach to the development of doctrines. This is key given the resurgence of faith garbed in syncretism and simony. The doctrines have to be explained in what a manner that speaks to Nigerian Catholics. Cardinal Anthony Okogie puts it well thus:

If truth must be told, the vast majority of those who have embraced the Catholic faith in Africa today have done so only superficially. Yes, they have been baptized; yes,

⁵⁸ Pope Francis, “A Letter to the Theological Faculty of the Pontifical University of Argentina,” March 3, 2015.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150303_lettera-universita-cattolica-argentina.html (accessed 20 December 2022).

⁵⁹ Pope Francis, “A Letter to the Theological Faculty of the Pontifical University of Argentina.”

OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations for the Church in Nigeria

they go to Church and receive the sacraments; yes, they belong to societies and pious associations. But how well grounded are they in knowledge of the Catholic faith? How well grounded are they in knowledge of scripture, sacred tradition, the teaching of magisterium, and in particular the moral and social teaching of the Church?”⁶⁰

These seminal questions confront the contemporary theologian and missionary in Nigeria. A critical question is: who does Catholic theology? Where is Catholic theology done?

Theology is done mainly by priests and religious, and in seminaries, a few Catholic institutes, and universities. Besides the CIWA, SIST, DIT, Dominican University, and Veritas University, theology as a discipline remains an exclusive privilege taught by a selected few to a selected few, at a few established institutions. What are these institutions compared to the population of Catholics (especially youth) in Nigeria? Theology, as Cardinal Anthony Okogie observes must “go beyond academic exercise in the comfort of our studies, libraries, and chanceries. We must step into the depths with our people and work to the frontiers of human experience so that our theologies can become incarnate in the very cultural, social and spiritual context of our people.”⁶¹ Theologians must step into the depths of uncharted aspects of inculturation of Catholic doctrines including Creation, Eschatology, Grace, and Mariology.

The second theological consideration is the inculturation African traditional marriage with the rites of the sacrament of marriage. The CIWA and SIST school are the pathfinders of this kind of inculturation. In addition, some particular churches in Nigeria have succeeded in a similar respect, notably the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja. However, a lot needs to be determined in order to make the sacrament of matrimony

⁶⁰ Anthony Cardinal Okogie, “The Role of African Theologians 50 years after Vatican II,” in *Love, Joy and Sex: African Conversations on Pope Francis’ Amoris Laetitia and the Gospel of Family in a Divided World*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Abuja: Paulines Publication Africa, 2022), 13.

⁶¹ Okogie, “The Role of African Theologians,” 12.

Catholic and truly Nigerian by incorporating the doctrine of marriage into the customary wedding customs. Other aspects of traditional marriage life that needs to be studied in the light of the Catholic doctrine of marriage include polygamy, caste system, women's inheritance right, child marriage, widowhood rites, and childless married women.⁶² Some of these cultural practices adversely affect the nature and goals of marriage. For example, those from the caste system cannot marry outside their caste, and the Church has not been able to change these degrading practices, despite affirming the doctrine of marriage. Such cultural realities need to be explored by theologians and missionaries to bring reprise to the faithful who desire clarity in light of the dignity and equality of the person as created in the image of God. The faith must be presented as a force that transcends barriers of caste, ethnicity, and discrimination (Gal 3:25-29).

9. Conclusion

Inculturation remains an important task for theologians if the Christian faith is to be truly rooted in Nigerian cultures. This is not a project to be developed in the 'theological laboratory' of seminaries and Catholic institutes/universities to be planted by missionaries in the mission fields. Theologians must adopt an inculturation approach that embraces an ethnographic study of culture, attentiveness to the grassroots and the involvement of Basic Christian Communities. This approach is capable of birthing an inclusive inculturation approach that empowers the faithful to work together to discuss how the Gospel in their specific culture. The truth is that Nigerians desire to worship God not as Europeans or Asians but—as Amo, Abayon, Ayu, Bansa, Bara, Tiv, Idoma, Chamba, or Ijaws—with reference to their specific culture. Nigerians desire to think and talk about God in their culture and celebrate the sacraments in their language. Nigerians desire that their faith resonate with their daily living and provide answers and hope to their social questions. Theologians must be creative to step into the inculturation of the Christian faith. If theologizing does not speak to the joys and sorrows, fears and anxieties,

⁶²See Rose N. Uchem, *Overcoming Women's Subordination: An Igbo African Christian Perspective-Envisioning an Inclusive Theology with Reference to Women* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2001); Luke E. Ijezie, et al., eds *The Family and the New Evangelization* (Port Harcourt: CATHAN Publication, 2015).

***OTU: Revisiting Inculturation Theology: Theological Considerations
for the Church in Nigeria***

dreams and hopes of our context, theology would have succeeded only in embarking on a lofty exercise of satisfying our intellectual curiosity. Theological discourse must lead to the revelation of Christ in the historical reality and human experiences of the Nigerian context.