

The Inculturation of Consecrated Life in Africa: Towards a Logic for Promoting and Safeguarding Indigenous Gifts of Fidelity

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Abstract

As many religious institutes and societies of Apostolic life in Africa are celebrating their hundred years of existence on African soil, questions have begun to arise as regards to what extent these religious institutes have been made to feel at home in Africa. These questions spring from the genuine need for authentic dialogue between the Christian faith and the religio-cultural and philosophical values of the African people. While many works have been written on inculturation theology, less attention has been paid to the possible relationship between the theology of consecrated life and African indigenous perspectives. The present work, therefore, focused on the theology of consecrated life as it relates to the possibility of inculturation. To address this, the Igwebuiké indigenous theoretical framework was adopted, while the hermeneutic, comparative, and analytical methods of inquiry were patronized for the development and achievement of the objective of the investigation. The paper established the possibility of the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa, and further provided the possible areas where this inculturation could take place. The paper discovered that

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the inculturation of consecrated life is possible within the context of the vows (chastity, poverty, and obedience) and community life.

Keywords: Consecrated Life, Inculturation, Africanization, Christianization, Igwebuiké

Introduction

During the 20th century, there emerged a strong need among African scholars and missionaries for the expression of the Christian faith within indigenous categories, to achieve the Christianization of the African culture and the Africanization of the Christian faith. This concern has endured until the 21st century, especially as many religious institutes and societies of apostolic life in Africa are celebrating the hundred years of their presence on African soil. There is now the question of the extent to which these religious institutes have been made to feel at home in Africa. This is a question that does not only border on the nature of their existence but on the future of their existence, given that their ability to adapt will determine the quality of their ability to endure into the future. The 1974 Synod of Bishops on Evangelization was particularly concerned about the superficiality and shallowness of the Christian life in Africa:

Our theological thinking must remain faithful to the authentic tradition of the church and at the same time be attentive to the life of our communities and respectful of our traditions and languages, that is our philosophy of life. Following this idea of mission, the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar consider as being completely out-of-date the so-called theology of adaptation. In its stead, they adopted the theology of incarnation (cited in Shorter 1988, p. 213).

A cursory glance at existing literature reveals that many works have been written on inculturation theology, that is, the insertion of the

Christian faith into particular cultures in such a manner that faith becomes culture and culture becomes faith; however, less attention has been paid to the possible of the inculturation of the theology of consecrated life in Africa. The present paper, therefore, discusses the theology of consecrated life as it relates to inculturation.

Establishing a Theological Framework

The theological theoretical framework for the understanding and interpretation of the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa is the Igwebuiké theological framework. In Igbo-African ontology, Igwebuiké is understood as a unifying concept, especially, that aspect concerning the human person's conception of the spiritual and material universe in which he or she lives. It is an explanatory theory or principle that interprets the puzzle of our complex relationships with the non-corporal world and human social life, that is, major social institutions that ensure social continuity and group identity, and further, underpins the epistemological manifestations of the human person's universe. The Igwebuiké theological framework is *apropos*, given that the consecrated speaks of a spiritual dimension in terms of understanding and life, and also given that a contextual approach is required of this study. Igwebuiké presents a complementary concept of the relationship between faith and culture.

However, within an integrated systematic framework, Igwebuiké strives beyond all forms of particularities, peculiarities, paradoxes, and contradictions and espouses the path of complementation, therefore, showing how realities can relate to one another in a mutually harmonized non-absolutistic mode. Thus, Igwebuiké explores methods and principles for the mediation, coalescing, and comprehension of the different units of reality: ideal and real, universal and particular, progressive and conservative, necessary and contingent, transcendent and immanent, essential and inessential, and other units of reality

within the same framework. It treats all units, fragments, or components of reality, no matter how minute as units and combinations, or missing links that are necessary for the conceptualization of reality as a whole.

Going back to the origin of the word, *Igwebuike* is a combination of three Igbo words. It can be understood as a word or a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. *Igwe* is a noun that means number or multitude, usually a large number of population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significance, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2016). *Igwe, bu, and Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu 2017). However, beyond the literal sense of *Igwebuike*, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. It is capable of concatenating forms, symbolism, signs, media, meaning, anthropology, universal cosmic truths, functions, semantic powers, physics, phenomena, faculties, and environmentalities.

The *Igwebuike* perspective is anchored on the fact that the universe in which the human person lives is a world of probabilities. An Igbo proverb says: “If a thing remains one, then nothing remains”. This is because the power or strength generated by a person is not strong enough to withstand the existential gamble of life, as the chances of being overcome are on the high side; thus the need for existential backing. In a metaphoric sense, *Igwebuike* within the Igbo linguistic setting refers to relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu 2016). The closest words to *Igwebuike* in English are complementarity, solidarity, and harmony.

The mutual relations and complementarity that *Igwebuiké* conceptualizes are steadied on the following basic human conditions:

- a. The world in which we live is one in which we encounter several needs, however, with very few resources to take care of the needs. This limitation calls for the mobilization of other forces outside of the self, a social fellowship for the satisfaction of particular needs.
- b. Nature has placed in us the likeness for fellowship. This is based on the fact that we were created by God in His image and likeness.
- c. Although we are equal essentially, we have different gifts and abilities. What I may be able to do another may not be able to do, meaning that my relationship with the other completes what is lacking in me.
- d. Collaboration with the other is a ground for becoming, as everything takes a bit of another to make itself. It is a ground for staying alive and transforming the universe (Kanu 2016).

This idea of mutuality, complementarity, solidarity, interrelationships, and relationality is the ontological logic that *Igwebuiké* provides for a discourse on the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa. It is a value that makes the consecrated life feel at home in Africa and the African people feel at home with the consecrated life.

Inculturation Theology

A historical analysis of the evolution of the Church reveals that the idea of inculturation is a new one, but again it is as old as the Church. It is thus not surprising that Onwubiko (1997) said that inculturation is a new vision of an old problem in the Church or a new approach to a solution to an old problem. It appeared in missiological discussions not so long ago. According to Metuh (1993), the concept was probably first

used in a theological sense by Joseph Masson, a professor at the Gregorian University of Rome. Mason (cited by Metuh, 1996), argues that there is a more urgent need for a Catholicism that is inculturated in a variety of forms.

Schineller (1990) avows that the exact origin of the word as it functions in the theological community is unclear, but he points to its use by Cardinal Sin of Manila at the Synod on Catechesis held in Rome in 1977 and its first insertion into Papal Documents by John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis on October 1979. Since then, the concept has become commonplace and was frequently used by John Paul II during his visits to Africa.

Metuh (1996), views the origin of the concept of inculturation from a secular perspective. He maintains that the term is borrowed from cultural anthropology where it denotes the process by which a person is inserted into his culture. This, however, has been given a slight change in its missiological use as a process by which the church becomes inserted into a particular culture. It is in this regard that Schineller (1990) says that “at its best, the term combines the theological significance of incarnation with the anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation to create something new” (p. 21).

A definition of the theological content of inculturation can be considered from a variety of angles. However, from whatever angle you choose to approach it, the theological content remains the same.

According to Walligo (1986),

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.... It is the continuous endeavor to make Christianity 'truly feel at home' in the cultures of each people. (p. 11).

In the contention of Arrupe (1990),

Inculturation is 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 cultures, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation. (p. 6).

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 to win salvation for all, the gospel must become 'culture' to win the heart of 'local people'. John Paul II (cited by Udoidem, 1996) shares the same sentiments with Arrupe when he defined inculturation as “the incarnation of the gospel in autochthonous cultures, at the same time, the introduction of these cultures into the life of the church” (p. 2). He further stresses the need for reciprocity in the relationship between the gospel and cultures.

Crollius (1986) adds a new dimension to our concept of inculturation when he defines it as,

The integration of the Christian experience of a local church into the culture of its people in such a way that the experience not only expresses itself in elements of this culture, but becomes a force that animates, orients, and innovates this culture to create a new unity and communion not only within the culture in question, but also as an enrichment of the church universal. (p. 43).

This notwithstanding, when all is said about inculturation, it must not be forgotten that it is a conscious and conscientious effort to help the people of Africa be converted down to the very roots of their culture. As its prospect, it strives to attain a confluence between the conversion of

mind and the conversion of the way of life, so that African Christians would be able to live their faith in all its depth and be able to give it expression in their way.

According to Metuh (1996), some concepts may suggest the same meaning at the pragmatic level with inculturation but are neither fully synonymous in conceptual content nor compatible in their theological or ideological implications. These concepts include interculturalization, enculturation, acculturation, indigenization, Africanization, contextualization, adaptation, and reformation. Amidst all these concepts, inculturation is chosen by the researcher as a veritable instrument for post-missionary evangelization in Africa because, as a concept, it possesses a wholeness that would enhance intensive evangelization in Africa.

Theology of Consecrated Life

Consecrated persons are the members of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life (Kanu 2015). The Code of Canon Law (1983) teaches that they are lay persons or clerics who assume the evangelical counsels using a sacred bond, and become members of an institute of consecrated life according to the law of the church. They dedicate themselves to God to pursue perfection in charity by faithfully embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In this sense, consecrated persons respond freely to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ the poor, the celibate, the obedient son, more closely, thus becoming in this life a sign of the life to come. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) maintains that:

The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty, and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls (No. 43).

These counsels in the contention of Fleming (1990), are referred to as evangelical because the religious vows are central to the life of Jesus and his message and also because religious consecration is founded on baptismal consecration. The consecrated life is also traceable to the post-apostolic church, especially to those early Christians who dedicated themselves to a gospel-oriented lifestyle, to a radical following of Jesus Christ. The first person in this line was Anthony of Egypt. He was followed by a line of disciples until it became an institution in the Church (Nwachukwu 2010).

Very significant to the understanding of consecrated life is the idea of consecration. It is derived from the word 'holy' or 'holiness'. In Hebrew it is *qadash* and in Greek *Hagios*; these are translated to mean 'to consecrate' (Leviticus 15:31; Ezekiel 14:7). In Numbers 6:5-7, 12, the Nazirites were referred to as consecrated because they vowed to God. This makes the person holy, a consecration that separates the person from others. Thus the word consecration implies a setting apart or a separation. This separation for Mayers (1987) does not in any way imply superiority or complete severance from those the consecrated are called to serve.

Lumen Gentium (1964) teaches that, “The state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to the life and holiness of the church” (No. 44). The document continues, “The holiness of the Church is fostered especially by the observance of the counsels proposed in the gospel by the Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state” (No. 42). Thus, *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) exhorts consecrated person: “Members of each institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to

his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully” (No. 5).

Theological Rationales for the Inculturation of Consecrated Life

This section of the paper is burdened with the task of establishing the rationale for the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa, and it is *apropos* to begin such a discourse from the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

When the Second Vatican Council was formally inaugurated on 11th October 1963 by Pope John XXIII with different continents in attendance, Rahner (1986:77-89) describes it as “the beginning of a tentative approach by the church to the discovery and official recognition of itself as world-church.” At this Council, the Church treated as a major issue the need for building a bridge between Christian perspectives and indigenous knowledge systems.

It is within this context that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC), the first conciliar document that was approved by the Second Vatican Council and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963, favored the revision and adaptation of the liturgy into particular circumstances and cultures. This was necessary given that the Christian faith implanted in mission territories could no longer be confined to Euro-centric cultural manifestations (Sacrosanctum Concilium 2010). The Church saw the need for people to hear God speaking to them in their tongues and languages (Acts 2:16). Rahner (1981:80) describes the Vatican II event as “the coming-to-be of a world church, with its particular churches each existing... in its cultural group.”

Gaudium et Spes, promulgated on December 7, 1965, by Pope Paul VI gave the highest attention to the topic of faith and culture, and thus provided room for the dialogue between the faith and the cultural

values of different cultures. The document rightly notes that “the human person can achieve true and full humanity only using culture.” (Gaudium et Spes 2010) It did not only recognize the importance of culture within the church but also outside the Church. It holds that human identity and transformation are deeply rooted in culture.

The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, uses the analogy of incarnation to justify the church among cultures. It states that:

Christ's incarnation is the paradigm for the young churches, insisting that if the church is to be in a position to offer to all the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, then it must implant itself among every group of people in the same way that Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the people among whom he lived (No. 10).

At the closing session of the First Plenary Assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) on evangelization and the cultural adaptation of faith in 1969, Pope Paul VI recognized the diversity of cultures and thus urged African Bishops to recognize that:

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 (p. 129).

Pope Paul VI in 1975 issued an Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In this document, he shows how the gospel message could be integrated within any given culture by bringing the Good News of Christ into all the strata of humanity so that humanity itself becomes a new creation. The Roman Pontiff teaches that:

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, and symbols if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life (p. 63).

Saint Pope John Paul II was known for his extensive travels to the local churches around the world. These travels afforded him a firsthand encounter with diverse cultures. He is the champion of a dialogue between Christianity and the various religious cultures of the world. He established “the Pontifical Council for Culture to help the Church be involved in the saving exchange in which inculturation of the Gospel goes hand in hand with the evangelization of cultures.” (No. 26)

Saint Pope John Paul II on 6 January 1993, announced a Special Assembly for Africa. In the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the Holy Father states that the *telos* of the synod will be:

To assist the Church in Africa to deepen, her commitment to the mission of evangelization, taking into account her history and development as well as the whole cultural, social, political, and economic context in which she lives. (No. 1)

The synod was held in Rome from April 10th to May 8th, 1994 and it represented the most important ecclesial gathering for Africa since Vatican II. It was the first time that the pastors of Africa gathered *cum et sub-Petro* to reflect on new ways and means of carrying out the evangelizing mission of the church on the continent (Chianain, 2018:32).

From the first document to the present, there has been a consistent emphasis on the need to build a bridge between faith and the cultures of local peoples. It is these perspectives that provide the theological foundation for the discourse on the indigenous logic for the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa.

Possible Areas for Inculturation

The possible areas for the inculturation of the consecrated life include the vows- the vows of poverty, obedience and chastity, and community life. There are other possible areas for inculturation, however, this paper will focus on the following four:

a. Vow of Chastity

The vow of chastity in *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) is understood as a means through which the religious frees his or her heart in a unique fashion (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-35) so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and all men and women. Thus, it not only symbolizes singularly the heavenly goods but also the most suitable means by which religious dedicate themselves with undivided hearts to the service of God and the works of the apostolate. In this way, they recall to the minds of all the faithful that wondrous marriage decreed by God and which is to be fully revealed in the future age in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse. Through the vow of celibacy/chastity, religious give themselves in love to God in a way so total that the pursuit of union with God makes it impossible for anything or anyone to be more central. Their heart is free to love God above all and to love all men and women for the sake of God. Celibacy is embraced not because marriage is not desired but because the union with God and the work of God is greatly desired.

The inculturation of the vow of chastity is anchored on the African philosophy of sexuality, which is often misrepresented because it is viewed from the Western perspective. Before the advent of Christianity, the African people had traditional customs of chastity. Through parables, proverbs, songs, etc., they have been able to teach their children high moral values, which are passed down from one generation to another. For instance, the Swazi people in South Africa uphold *Umcwasho* custom, which is a system of chastity that restrains

young females and males who have not reached the age of puberty from being involved in sexual activities, for a time usually determined by the king. Society, family, and friends of the young boys and girls, treasure and value the significance of the conservation of the virginity of children above all things. Therefore, beginning from an understanding of the value of chastity from within the African culture is likely to drive a better understanding of the vow of chastity. Chastity and the value of virginity is not foreign to the culture of the African people.

b. Vow of Obedience

In professing obedience, *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) teaches that the religious offer the full surrender of their own will as a sacrifice of themselves to God and so are united permanently and securely to God's salvific will. After the example of Jesus Christ who came to do the will of the Father (cf. John 4:34; 5:30; Heb. 10:7; Ps. 39:9) and “assuming the nature of a slave” (Phil. 2:7) learned obedience in the school of suffering (cf. Heb. 5:8), religious under the motion of the Holy Spirit, subject themselves in faith to their superiors who hold the place of God. Under their guidance, they are led to serve all their brothers and sisters in Christ, just as Christ in obedience to the Father served His brethren and laid down His life as a ransom for many (cf. Matt. 20:28; John 10:14-18). through obedience, the religious are closely bound to the service of the Church and strive to attain the measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). The vow of obedience, helps the religious to make decisions in tune with God's Will, which is often mediated for them through the authority of their congregation.

The inculturation of the vow of obedience is anchored on the African philosophy of obedience which constituted authority and those who are older than one. The understanding of the authority of the king, the father or mother, or the first son, etc., and obedience to them is not only understood in a physical sense, there is a spiritual backing to this authority which is handed down to every generation. This

understanding of authority and the absolute obedience that follows is a structure around which the vow of obedience can be weaved. It also reminds us that obedience is not a practice that is alien to the African people. There are a retinue of stories and proverbs that teach the value of obedience.

c. Vow of Poverty

Perfectae Caritatis (1965) presents religious poverty as a share in the poverty of Christ who for our sakes became poor, even though He was rich so that by His poverty we might become rich (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9; Matt. 8:20). About religious poverty, it is not enough to use goods in a way subject to the superior's will, but members must be poor both in fact and in spirit, their treasures being in heaven (cf. Matt. 6:20). By the vow of Poverty, Religious own everything in common, share possessions and live simply.

The inculturation of the vow of poverty within the context of the African worldview is possible from the angle of the African's emphasis on the value of the human person and not on the value of what a person has or possesses. This has promoted a sense of selflessness among the African people even before the advent of Christianity. The spirit of sharing among the African people is also significant in a discourse about the inculturation of the vow of poverty. Life for the African is a life of sharedness. And there are several African stories that help the young to understand the consequences of pursuing wealth at the expense of one's dignity, and also the importance of sharing what one has with the other given that the other is a part of me. These can be instruments for the communication of the idea of the vow of poverty to the African people.

d. Community Life

Fraternal life in common is a distinguishing feature of Religious Institutes (Can. 607). According to John Paul II (1996) in his *Vita*

Consecrata, fraternal life understood as a life shared in love is practiced in Religious Institutes, Societies of Apostolic life and it is also not alien to Secular Institutes, or even to individual forms of Consecrated Life. A religious community is a community of grace that God has called together. It is not based on natural bonds and blood relationships but on a new relationship rooted in Christ, who calls them to live among themselves. A religious community, according to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, is established and endures not because the members find that they are happy staying together due to an affinity in thought or character, but because the Lord has brought them together and unites them all by a common consecrated and for a common mission in the Church.

Hence, the religious community before being a human construction, is a gift of the Spirit. Therefore, it is impossible to understand a religious community unless we begin with it being a gift from God and deeply rooted in the very heart of the Trinity. Religious are bound to reside in their own religious house, observing the common life. They are not to stay elsewhere except with the permission of the superior (Can. 665.1). In the newly amended Canon 694 of the Code of Canon Law amended by Pope Francis on March 19, 2019, A religious must be held as dismissed *ipso facto* from an institute who has been illegitimately absent from the religious house, under can. 665 §2, for 12 consecutive months, taking into account that the location of the religious himself or herself may be unknown (Can. 694.3).

The inculturation of the idea of community is made easy by the fact that the idea of community is central to the African people. This is obvious in African proverbs such as: “I am because you are, and since you are, therefore, I am”; “A tree cannot make a forest”, etc. This identity of the African people is reflected in the complementary philosophies that have emerged in recent times in African philosophy, such as Igwebuiké philosophy, Ibuanyidanda philosophy, philosophy of Belongingness,

Ujamaa philosophy, philosophy of negritude, etc. The African concept of community life is a strong basis for the inculturation of community life within African categories.

Conclusion

The foregoing is a response to the emerging questions within the parameters of both inculturation and the consecrated life. Consecrated persons are beginning to ask questions as regards how the manner of life that they have freely chosen can be made to feel at home in their particular cultural environment. They are also asking questions regarding how this manner of life can be interpreted from an African perspective or employ the categories that are specific to the African people. These concerns are emerging from genuine thoughts about the promotion and safeguarding of consecrated life in Africa.

The Igwebuiké theological framework establishes the possibility of a complementary relationship between the African culture and the theology of consecrated life, in such a manner that neither of the two dimensions are diminished. The idea of inculturation becomes a tool for the realization of this need, and, therefore, forms a very important dimension of this work. It provides a basis for the adaptation of consecrated life and the 'consecration' of the African culture or categories.

This notwithstanding, there is always the challenge of a misunderstood concept of inculturation not only among theologians but also among the regular lay faithful. This is not in any way to undermine the position of many who look forward to a genuine encounter between faith and the culture of the African people. Despite the challenges, there are many opportunities that it promises: it would to a great extent guarantee the future of consecrated life in Africa; it would also give consecrated life in Africa the unique identity of an African consecrated life. This

identity does not in any way affect or detract from the primary identity of consecrated life in general.

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