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ajct@sistenugu.com

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All editorial correspondence should be sent to:

The editor-in-chief

African Journal of Contextual Theology

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

e-mail: editorajct@sistenugu.com ; nmarysylvia@yahoo.com

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UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING CHRISTIAN FAITH THROUGH THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF AFRICAN TRADITION

Ikenna Bona UGWU, C.S.Sp

1. Introduction

Africa is endowed with a variety of cultural and religious values, systems and institutions waiting to be discovered, appreciated, converted and assumed into the truth of the Gospel of Christ so that they are able to mediate more deeply graces for the salvation of the people and their world. The advent of Christianity in Africa brought about the meeting of these existing cultures and faith of Africans which have not only existed undisturbed for ages but served the needs of its people and the new Christian faith. Many people decry the fact that the early missionaries who brought the faith to Africa did not understand so much the culture which they met and consequently they did not give it the kind of attention required to have the Christian faith truly incarnated in the soil of Africa. However, the Second Vatican Council ushered in a new phase of evangelization in the continent which started to redirect attention, energy, time and other resources towards making Christianity truly African and Africans truly Christian. Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the Fathers of the Council were able to recognize in the diverse cultures of the world seeds of the Good News already existing before the coming of Christ.

Today, the African Church is at the stage where the incarnation of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the heart and soul of the continent, that is Inculturation, is both a

fundamental task and an imperative for the survival and effective growth of faith among the people. A lot of effort is being made by Christians, theologians and the entire Church in Africa to see that the Gospel is successfully rooted in the continent through Inculturation.

This paper falls within this project of Inculturation and it aims at identifying three elements of African culture deemed to have the potentials of giving expression to some core Christian doctrines and practices. These cultural elements are the African systems of the extended family, the classificatory method of naming relationship and the African understanding and practice of urban life. Our study wants to show that these three elements of African culture can in different ways provide for greater comprehension and appreciation of the realities of the Church as communion, Christian eschatology and the designations of persons with names and titles in Christianity. It is hoped that using these elements of culture to understand and communicate the Christian faith in Africa and beyond will be of great advantage in terms of making the faith more meaningful and fruitful in this part of the world.

2. Three Elements of African Culture

2.1 The Family in Traditional African Societies

The family is known to be the oldest and the most basic institution in human society. It serves as the nursery where human life is first planted and nurtured until it is mature enough to live and work with a view to forming another family. Hence, Adjaero rightly observed that, “the family is universally accepted as the basic unit of society. It is like the foundation of a house; whatever threatens the foundations,

threatens the house".¹ Notwithstanding its universal nature, the family as a social institution is not very easy to define. Common sense suggests that a family is composed of a mother, a father and their children. This definition, apparently, captures the core content of the family but it does not take into consideration the families of single parents where there is only the mother and her children without a man. It also does take note of the situation of the childless man and wife, who though they are married have no children either because they are naturally incapable of producing them or they willfully decided to do without bearing children. Adoption is also increasingly gaining ground and children so adopted form a family with their adoptive parents or parent. In some African societies, custom gives a woman the legal right to marry another woman and beget children through her and thus forming one family with the married woman and her children. All these show how difficult it is to say what a family actually is.

Perhaps we might consider a definition given by the sociologist/anthropologist Nwanunobi; according to him, "In all societies the family is a social group comprising one or more women, their children and, most often, men, all of whom together make up a socially acceptable unit".² Among other things, this definition interestingly underlines the fact that a family could have one or more women and that even though men are often part of the family, it is not always the case. This view that the presence of a man or father/husband is not always an essential constitutive element of the family

¹ Noel Mary Adjaero, *The Structure of the Family: A Social Institution*, Onitsha: Spiritan Publication, 1996, p. 2.

² C. Onyeka Nwanunobi, *African Social Institutions*, Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 1992, p. 41.

is supported by what obtains in some matrilineal African cultures such as the Yao of Malawi where “most of the men are often not resident with their wives and children. Even more glaring, among the Ashanti of Ghana characterized by what has been described as ‘visiting husbands’, wife and children invariably live separately from the father”.³

Judging from the structures and the type of relationships that obtain in families across culture, two major forms of family are often identified, namely, the nuclear family and the extended family. The nuclear family is the most basic, simple or elementary type of family unit usually composed of a woman, her children and most frequently a man. They often live together within a household. This family structure obtains predominantly in developed nations and in urban or industrialized areas. The condition of life in the cities such as Lagos, Onitsha, Ibadan, Port Harcourt or Enugu is such that many families find it extremely hard to find enough space to live and operate. Even those who are landlords usually rent out the bigger portions of their houses and remain with just something like a flat for their family. A good number of city dwellers can only afford two rooms and sometimes only one for the entire family. Moreover, life is very expensive to maintain in the cities than in the rural settings. In the city, most people do not have farmlands to cultivate and as a result everything consumed by the family in terms of food are purchased. The more persons a family has to feed, the more difficult life is for both the bread-winners and those fed by them. In the meantime, money is needed to provide for other essentials of life such as clothing, education and health. Situations like these force families to go for smaller sizes. These small-sized families so created by circumstances often

³ Nwanunobi, *African Social Institutions*, p. 42.

exist without relatives surrounding them. They live with people from other communities with whom there are no kinship ties and genealogical connections. This is the nuclear family.

On the other hand, the extended family differs in size, membership and residence. It is often a combination of nuclear families of more than three generations who share close social intimacy but often dispersed in various homesteads. Social anthropologists agree that there is a connection between extended family system and polygamy, which is the practice whereby a man is married to more than one wife (Polygyny) or a woman is married to more than one man (Polyandry) at the same time.

The extended family system is typical of traditional African societies particularly in rural areas. Even with increased industrialization and modernity, the extended family system in Africa has continued to survive and play significant roles in society. Besides the socialization and nurturing of the young ones which is common to most families, the extended family system goes further to provide its members with social security, protection and opportunities for growth. Relatives join hand together in the education of children, provision of basic care and the integration of people into the larger society. A child does not belong to his or her basic family only. A good number of men and women that imbibed Western education some years ago were not trained by their direct parents but by distance or close relatives.

Even in cities and overseas, the extended family ties are maintained and they play a lot of role with regard to the survival and progress of people there. Usually, when people

leave their homes to the cities or outside their country, their first port of call is the families of extended relatives. Many people continue to stay with their kinsmen or women until they are able to relatively stand on their own feet. Thus, the often challenging conditions associated with the migration of the youth from the villages to the cities or from one's country to another are usually cushioned by the assistance of extended family members already settled in those places. Men and women of the same community, which is often enlarged extended families, form associations in the cities aimed at helping themselves in providing one another the solidarity and assistance necessary for their survival outside home. Regular meetings are held by these associations and their proceedings are guided by both written constitutions and many unwritten customs. The members of these associations have ways of generating fund for their immediate needs and for use in responding to emergency situations affecting their members. When a member of the association falls into any serious trouble such as in the police net or immigration cases for those overseas, the association comes out to assist in seeing that it is addressed and the person in question rescued. If death occurs particularly accidentally, the association makes sure that the deceased is taken home for a befitting burial. These obvious benefits that accrue from the association of kinsmen and women in the cities and overseas make the membership of such organizations almost obligatory for all concerned.

One of the illustrious sons of Ngwa of the Igbo peoples of Nigeria, Justin Harris (a.k.a Uchenna Nwachukwu), in his books titled, *The Lucky Ones South of the Sahara*, uses his people in the United States of America to show how important the extended family system is to the growth of

society in Igbo land. He compares an Ngwa man or woman in America to somebody who has gone on a trading venture. He said,

...the concept of a trading venture, leaving home in search of a better life, or permanent emigration, has implications for the trader/sojourner/immigrant. She or he has obligations towards the extended family. He or she is expected to reach out and touch someone. In the new millennium, and specifically, as Nigeria continues to experience unending growing pains, the challenge is greater. It is greater because Ngwa has no kingship or feudal system. We are a simple people. We rely, first, on individual achievements; and second, on collective help among the extended family.⁴

The Igbo people place a lot of emphasis on individual achievement which motivates people to work hard and fight seriously to leave marks on the tide of times in society. However, the individual achievements are expected to be at the service of the good of the community beginning with one's extended family. A man or woman who acquires wealth and refuses to help his or her relatives is often regarded as a wicked person and suspected of getting his wealth from a bad source.

One other interesting dimension of the extended family system in Africa is that the network of relationship involved goes beyond this present life. Beyond its extension to the cities and overseas, the extended family affiliation includes those in the ancestral world. All the members of the family that lived good lives and are dead continue to form part of the extended family. Ikenga-Metuh rightly points out that

⁴ Justin Haris, *The Lucky Ones South of the Sahara*, 2012, pp. 164-165.

even though the ancestors acquire greater powers which put them next to the deities in the ontological order and make them mediators between God and man, yet they are best regarded as glorified living-dead members of the family...Consequently, the living approach them as they did when they were alive. Respect given them is often incongruously mixed with the casualness of a normal family gathering. They are approached as comrades and elder kinsmen who have as much interest in the welfare of the family as their living kinsmen.⁵

As we know, Africans believe that life continues after death though in a manner different but not completely separated from the earthly existence. A concrete expression of this belief can be seen in the rites of burial among the Igbo. For example, in Ovoko community (found in the present Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State), men are usually buried facing the rising of the sun while women are buried facing the sunset. This is explained by the simple fact that the profession by which a man is known in Igbo land is farm work and the woman has the kitchen as their principal office. It is the rising of the sun that reminds the man that it is time to go to the farm while the setting of the same sun tells the woman that it is time to get dinner prepared. Supper is the main meal for most Igbo families because their breakfast and lunch are taken in their place of work. Thus, by having the man and woman face the directions of the sunrise and sunset respectively, the people express their belief that even after death, a person continues to exercise the responsibilities which he or she was known for while on earth. In other words, the dead are alive and they remain part and parcel of

⁵ Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1987, p. 156/157. See also, E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion, A Definition*, London: SCM Press, p. 184/185.

the extended family. This is part of the reason for their insistence on having their dead ones buried in their homes among their kinsmen. To have a deceased buried away from home, for instance, in the city or overseas amounts to having him or her separated from their family. This is never the desire or dream of any traditional African (Igbo).

The complex and dynamic web of relationship which characterize the extended family system in Africa is seen in the way they name relationships. Adjaero observes that in extended family structures, "The terms 'father', 'mother', and 'child' are not merely the names of genealogical positions, the contents of the roles attached to which may vary from society to society".⁶ In what follows we will reflect further on this with a view to deciphering how it can help us to understand the Christian faith more deeply and live it more sincerely.

2.2 The Classification of Relationships in Africa

In the year 2005, I was in a parish (St Jerome's) in the city of Phoenix, Arizona in the United States of America where I was not just an Associate Pastor but in practice the priest in charge of the parochial affairs because there was no substantive Pastor at the time. Besides the celebration of Masses and other sacraments, my duty included holding offices daily except on Thursday which was my Day-Off in the week. In the office, I attended to administrative matters and to people who came there for various reasons. One day, I left the office for a sick-call and when I came back, the lady at the desk (the receptionist and secretary) had a message for me. She handed me a note which read "your brother Joseph called to inform you that he will pay you a visit tomorrow".

⁶ Adjaero, *The Structure of the Family*, p. 54.

After going through the message, I looked up and saw that almost all the workers at the parochial office at the time were out of their offices and their gaze focused on me. I could see excitement and surprise in their faces. The office manager spoke up immediately; “You did not tell us that your brother lives here in America” and she added “we are happy that he is coming to visit”. Then another person said, “I can’t wait to see your brother”.

In the meantime, the Joseph, my brother in question happened to be a man from Ebe in Udi Local Government of Enugu State whom I met some weeks before in a meeting of Nigeria in that area. We are from the same State (Enugu State) and that made us brothers. We are not from the same local Government area, the same community or kindred, not to speak of the same parents. However, in the far away United States, we understood ourselves as closely related to each other and the most appropriate terms for qualifying this relationship is “brother”. It took me time to explain this to my American colleagues in the parish office. My explanation seemed to have been understood by them but I am not sure if they really grasped the whole reality of what I was telling them, namely, that somebody who was not born of my mother and father calls me his brother.

Most societies in Europe and North America have what sociologists call a “descriptive” way of naming relationships which seeks precision and exactness as far as possible. This quest for precision gives room for the multiplication of designations such as “half-brother”, “half-sister”, “first”, “second”, “third” or even “fourth” cousins, “step father” or “step mother” and so on. The brother of one’s father or mother is called an uncle while the sister of one’s parents is

called aunt. All these are done to ensure that relationships between people within a wider family are not confused with the nuclear family. On the contrary, Africans because their understanding of family is extended, the way they name relationships in society is also extensive. Usually, those who are called uncles and aunts in the West can be called father or mother especially when they are advanced in age or one's direct parents are no longer alive.

Our interest in this writing is not about whether the way that relationship are described in the West is better than the African classificatory system or vice versa; it is rather to highlight the positive implications of the African method to the understanding and living of Christian faith in Africa. In the meantime, let us examine another element of the culture.

2.3 The Urban Life among Africans

Urban life in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, has a peculiar characteristic that one does not readily find in Europe and North America. This distinguishing mark is that usually Africans who live in cities have other domiciles in rural or semi-rural places which they usually refer to as home. There is hardly anybody who is completely an urban dweller without another place where he or she calls his home. Sometimes, we find cases where the so-called home grows into a city and thus creates a kind of exception to this rule. For instance, indigenes of Onitsha in Anambra State of Nigeria may be classified in this group. Even then, within the city of Onitsha, there are areas which are regarded as the Inland-Town which the original inhabitants of the place take as their home.

The City is a Dwelling Place but not a Home

Anyone who has lived in Nigeria for fairly long time or is a Nigerian would know that almost every city dweller in the country has another place, usually a rural area where he calls his or her home. Does this diminish their contributions to the city where they dwell? Evidences do not show that this belief in a home different from where they live diminishes the contributions of people to the growth and development of the city. Let us take the Catholic Church as an example. As we know, the faith life of Catholics is organized along the lines of parishes and dioceses. City-dwellers play active roles in the parishes and dioceses where they live. This may explain why city parishes and metropolitan dioceses are reputedly more economically viable and structurally more developed than those in rural areas. Sometimes, those who are the great movers of parish and diocesan projects in the urban areas do not play active part in the activities of their home parishes. One of the reasons for this is that city life is marked by anonymity because of which some negative elements like envy, jealousy and unhealthy competition that obtains in traditional communities are highly diminished. Often times, the Vice-Chairmen of the Parish Council, the Chairmen of Ordination Committees, and Chief supporters of Launching at the rural parishes are people from the cities. They travel home whenever there are activities and meetings that demand their presence. Under normal circumstances, the cities enjoy big populations of people but in times of great festivals such as Christmas and New Year or periods of serious upheavals, people desert the cities and move to their homes.

Home is a place to retire and ultimately a place to be buried when people die. The city is considered a place where people go to make a living and when this is done or when one can no

longer do so because of old age or sickness, he or she goes home. As people living in the city get older and weaker, they begin to think home. Even if they do not return directly to their father's house, they usually would like to get nearer home. People would build houses in semi-urban towns closest to their villages which afford them the dual advantage of being as close as possible to their home and yet shielded from all the demands and challenges associated with living in the village. However, death automatically sends people home.

Most Africans believe that eternal rest includes being buried in one's home where one would enjoy the company of relatives. It is the wish of every Igbo person, for example, to die a kind of death that would enable him or her to be buried in his or her ancestral home. Any death which disqualifies a person from this is considered a bad death and people have to do everything possible within their life time to avoid it. It is used by society as a measure for controlling behaviour; deviants of certain degree and sort may be denied burial at home. They are thrown away in the evil forests and this is considered one of the worst punishments that could be given to a person. Before the advent of Christianity and its teaching that by marriage especially when it is sacramentally celebrated, a man and his wife become indissolubly one, women were usually taken back to their family-of-birth when they die. All these explain why in the West, cities usually have big cemeteries to take care of their deceased members but this is not the case with the urban areas in Nigeria.

Given these ways that Africans particularly Nigerians perceive city life in relation to "their homes", it is customary that a person living in the urban area pays serious attention to

what happens back home. For example every man makes effort to have a house built at home. Having a house of one's own in the city is not considered a thing that a person must do but a house in the village is not optional. Once a person makes money in the city, he goes home to build. One is considered a fool who spends his life in the city and forgets to invest on his home. When such a person retires, falls sick or dies, it would become obvious to everybody that he wasted his life in the city. Relatives back at home always make it their point of duty to keep reminding and worrying their brothers and sisters in the city or overseas of the importance of getting rooted at home and connected to their kins. A person who did not identify with home and relatives therein is usually rejected when he eventually returns whether alive or dead. I attended the burial of a man in a certain village in Igbo land who lived with his family in the city not very far from his village-home but did not care so much to connect with home. From the look of things, the man would have planned to focus first on bringing up his children and thereafter settle to address the issues about home. Unfortunately, death came suddenly and aborted the most likely plan he had. When he was taken home, his relatives treated him and his immediate family as strangers. Practically, everything including the digging of the grave was done by us, visitors. Such treatments as this serve as deterrent to anybody who might be spending his or her life in the city without thinking home. The point is that the wise African considers every investment made at home an insurance measure taken for the rainy day and so does not waste time in city without being rooted and connected to home.

3. The Implications of Our Culture for our Faith

We have presented three various ways of life that are largely characteristic of Africa, namely the extended family system, the classificatory system of relationship and the system of urban life that promotes double domiciles. Now, we would like to discuss how these cultural elements in Africa can contribute to the deeper understanding of the Christian faith which many of Africans have come to embrace. We shall do this under three headings:

3.1 Implications for Church as Communion

In the book of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the Church is severally described as the "Community of believers" or the "Community of disciples". Following Christ gives rise to a community where the memory of the Risen Lord is kept alive, celebrated, emulated and proclaimed as a message of salvation to the whole world. As Fuellenbach rightly observes, "Community puts the stress on 'inter-personal' relationship, be it to the triune God or to the members themselves, rather than describing the Church in terms of 'institution of salvation' or as a perfect society. It aims at personal growth through interpersonal relationship".⁷ The notion of the Church as communion has been identified as one of the greatest achievements of the Second Vatican Council in the area of ecclesiology. In the minds of the Council, the Communion, which the Church is, has both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The most fundamental aspect of communion is "the intimate relationship the faithful have with the triune God".⁸ In God, there is a communion of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct yet

⁷ John Fuellenbach, *Church, Community for the Kingdom*, Manila: Logos Publications, 2000, pp. 149/150.

⁸ Fuellenbach, *Church*, p. 150.

mutually interpenetrating one another in reciprocity of love. The Church is called to represent, make present, anticipate and participate in this eternal communion wherein there is no solitude. In his ecological doctrine of creation and the social doctrine of the Trinity, Moltmann points out that the idea of communion between the Triune God and a community of men and women in the world is nothing new in the history of salvation. In the beginning, the world was created to live and work in communion with the Creator. Israel's God is one who dwells in the world he created and as such creation is not simply God's handwork but his home. This is why God's relationship with the world should best be viewed as "relationships of mutuality which describes a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created beings".⁹ The Church as communion is the concrete sacramental presence of the original plan of God in terms of forming a community with creation. From the prior communion with the Trinity, there follows the relationship of the faithful with one another as brothers and sisters in a living fellowship. In this fraternal communion,

To be alive means existing in relationship with other people and things. Life is communication in communion. And conversely, isolation and lack of relationship means death for all living things, and dissolution even for elementary particles. So, if we want to understand what is real as real, and what is living as living, we have to know it in its own primal and individual community, in its relationships, interconnections and surroundings.¹⁰

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, Eng. tr. Margaret Kohl, London: SCM Press, p. 14.

¹⁰ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 3.

By being united to the Father through his Son Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, human beings find the power to draw nearer to one another and overcome the tendency towards egoism and extreme individualism. Usually, "the process of growth imposes on the individual a double necessity; to 'centre' or develop the self to the utmost possibility and to 'de-centre' the self by going out to form a unity with others...However, the natural temptation to which some individuals as well as nations fall prey is to pitch tent and stop at the level of individual development thinking that that is the end".¹¹ Our world is riddled with egoism and egoist who think that their personality and possession will decrease by sharing themselves and what they own with others. Individuals and nations seek to grow in isolation by promoting the principles of self-sufficiency and independence which promotes exploitation, suppression and subordination of the weak at all levels of society. On the contrary, the ideal community of human beings set forth by the New Testament is one where "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free persons, there is not male and female...".¹² This is an ideal but not utopian because it is realizable in the present situation of the world even though it might not be perfect.

In their concerted attempt to define the nature and mission of the Church, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council underlined the fact that the Church as it is in the present age is a pilgrim. It is a community which, in the present is "the

¹¹ Bona I. Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit as Present and Active in Cosmic Turmoil and Human Suffering: A Dialogue between Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Jürgen Moltmann*, Rome, 2004, p. 115.

¹² *Galatians* 3: 28.

Universal Sacrament of salvation”¹³ but “will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven”.¹⁴ In the meantime, this pilgrim Church is united with all the faithful who have slept in the Lord in the hope of the resurrection. Put simply, the Council states

The union of the wayfarers with the brethren who sleep in the peace of Christ is in no way interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the constant faith of the Church, this union is reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods. Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness, add to the nobility of the worship that the Church offers to God on earth and in many ways helping a broader building up of the Church.¹⁵

The faithful on earth, those who are already in the glory of heaven and others who are yet undergoing purgation together form a living communion anchored in Christ. Belief in this communion of all the faithful departed, the saints, martyrs, virgins, and the holy angels has been part of the faith of the Church from its earliest days.

The African extended family system provides a cultural basis for the understanding and practice of communion ecclesiology. In this regard, Onwubiko remarks that “In the typical African family there are found all sorts of individuals, just as the Church is made up of saints and sinners. In a typical African compound-family, one finds peace-makers and trouble-makers, builders and destroyers, dancers and drummers, strong and weak people, in short, in the African

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, no 48.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, no 48.

¹⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 49.

imagery, in a great family there is no type of music that one beats and you would not find someone in it who can dance its tune. Yet it remains, continues and functions as one family".¹⁶ The extended family also represents an authentic expression of the communion of saints—a relationship linking men and women of different times, places, the living and the dead in a common bond located in Jesus Christ. Affirming this reality, the Synod Fathers at the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994 observed that "The sons and daughters of Africa love life. It is precisely this love for life that leads them to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors. They believe intuitively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them. Is this not in some way a preparation for belief in the Communion of the Saints?"¹⁷

For the African extended family system to adequately serve as the context for understanding and teaching the Christian values of communion, community, sharing and mutual inter-relatedness, it has to experience in itself some form of conversion. This is likely why Onwubiko is of the view that "A redefinition of the African family in the light of the ecclesiology of Vatican II is urgently called for".¹⁸ For we know that the extended families in Africa are usually founded on biosocial ties that result in clans, villages and ethnic groups. Thus, Uzukwu thinks that the African cultural experience of family should not be allowed to set the terms

¹⁶ Oliver A. Onwubiko, *The Church in Mission in the Light of Ecclesia in Africa*, Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 2001, p. 93.

¹⁷ John Paul II (1994), *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission towards the Year 2000, Ecclesia in Africa*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, no.43.

¹⁸ Onwubiko, *The Church in Mission*, p. 92.

for the construction of the new family of God.¹⁹ The terms should rather be set by Jesus and his living tradition handed down from one generation to another by the Church. The Lord Jesus lived in a culture where family bonds were primarily based on blood ties but he proposed to his followers a new form of family constructed on the basis of doing God's will.²⁰ This new form of family is more inclusive or universalized than we find in the extended family system in Africa. Hence, while adopting the image of Church as the Family of God as its guiding model for the evangelization in Africa, the Synod Fathers expressed serious concern about the danger of ethnocentrism which could result from the lack of openness on the part of the families. Their position on this matter is that "The new evangelization will 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, favouring solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular Churches, without undue ethnic considerations".²¹

The African system of extended family also promotes patriarchal dominance and it is a danger to guard against in proposing it as basis for practicing the Gospel.²² Majority of traditional African societies are patrilineal whereby descent and inheritance go through the male line. Women do not own such properties as land, houses and economic trees. Among the Igbo, the kolanut ritual represents one of clearest

¹⁹ Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 66.

²⁰ Cf. Mark 3: 31-34.

²¹ John Paul II (1994), *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63.

²² Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, p. 66.

evidences of male dominance in African culture. It is not permissible for women to break kolanut in public; as long as the presentation, breaking and passing round of the broken kolanut are concerned, women do not count for the Igbo. These and some other similar practices call for true conversion and when that is done, the extended family system can play more effectively the role as doors to a better dialogue and acceptance of the Good News of Christ in Africa.

3.2 Implications for Christian Application of Names and Titles to Persons

The African system of naming relationships in a classificatory manner provides another favourable context for teaching and living the practice of establishing names and titles of relationship in the wider family of God. Let us think of some of the merits of the African system of naming relationship and how it provides ways of promoting the Christian vision in the world. From the discussion so far, one can see that even though Africans are aware of and sometimes distinguish between very close and not very close relations, the terms "father", "mother", "brother" and "sister" practically covers all the relationships that obtain in the extended family. The flexibility exemplified in this African culture paves way for accepting without difficulty certain relationships which the Church proposes to us in relating with God, the saints and fellow men and women. For instance, the Christian faith teaches us not only to call God Our father, but to understand him to be exactly so having being adopted by him through baptism. We accept this and comply with it not minding the fact that we already have somebody or persons whom we relate to and designate as fathers in our families. This practice can only be explained

better in the context of the classificatory structure of naming relationships.

The Catholic Church has a long standing tradition of referring to her priests as “Reverent Fathers” which some people today tend to find problems with. Those who do this try to back up their reluctance to call the priest, “father” with Scriptural texts where the Lord Jesus Christ forbids us from calling any man on earth our father. I often find this interpretation of Scripture one-sided, unhealthy and too literal. This is because the same people who use this passage to substantiate their positions call their own parent father and do not find any problems with having their children call them father.

In a similar way, we address the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as our mother and we do this without minding our biological mothers whom we also call by the same title. Jesus is also presented to us as a brother and he is sometimes addressed as such. The Church is called mother and in Christian tradition some mystics like Julian of Norwich and theologians like Reuther, Moltmann, Gelpi and O'Donnell have applied the notion of mother to the Holy Spirit.²³ One of the objections raised against the application of the title “mother” to the Holy Spirit is that such will create confusion with the same title already given to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This objection does not have strong merits if we acknowledge the fact that in this matter, the Church is operating a system very similar to the African classificatory method of naming relationships.

²³ Cf. Ugwu, *The Holy Spirit*, p. 247.

One of the obvious criticisms leveled on Catholics in view of their relationship with the Holy Spirit is that they substitute the Eucharist, the Pope and the Virgin Mary for the Holy Spirit. It is purported that some of the key functions, roles, attributes and titles of the Holy Spirit are also applied to the Pope, the Eucharist or the Blessed Virgin Mary. For example, the place of the Holy Spirit as the principle of unity in the Church is often given to the Pope or the bishop. Similarly, the Virgin Mary is called the Comforter, Advocate, and Defender of the faithful, and the soul of the Church; these are attributes by which the Holy Spirit is identified.²⁴ Now, if we go by the logic of the classificatory system of naming relationships, which is typically African, one might find little or no problems with the fact that the names or titles given to the Holy Spirit are in some instances applied to Virgin Mary or the Pope.

3.3 Implications for Christian Eschatology

The African understanding and practice of urban life represent a very concrete model of the two dimensions of Christian faith epitomized in its eschatological hope lived in active commitment to the earth. In the African city dweller, we see a man or woman who lives in a place where he works hard and contributes earnestly to its growth but has another place where he or she calls a home. Even though essential amenities like water, electricity, roads and medical services may be more available in the cities, home is still considered the best. The home is a place of rest and retirement after the long days of work are ended. It is a place to be when life's journey is finished. The wise African city dweller is that man or woman who lives by the famous adage that, "East and

²⁴ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, tr. D. Smith, Vol. I, New York: The Crossroad Publishing, 1997, pp. 160-164.

West, home is the best". Thinking home and storing up treasures there constitutes an essential part of wise living by the African.

Christian faith and life is characteristically eschatological and one of the greatest outcomes of the biblical renewal movement of the Nineteenth century to Christianity can be described as the rediscovery of eschatology in Christian theology. The term 'rediscovery' is fitting in the sense that before this time, eschatology in the minds of many referred simply to the last things in human existence, namely, death, judgment, heaven, hell and the second coming of Christ.²⁵ Understood in this way, eschatology was often treated as an appendix in dogmatic theology and distanced from biblical witnesses. Prophetic eschatology of the Old Testament maintained a healthy tension between the individual and collective destiny as well as this-worldly and other-worldly hope. In the New Testament, the length and breadth of the Christ-event (his coming, ministry, suffering, death, resurrection and pouring out his Spirit) are eschatological grounded. However, with developments and shifts in time, "the gap between the natural and the supernatural widened, the split between the sacred and the secular increased, the dualism of body and soul became more marked, and the separation of this life and the next world became more apparent".²⁶ Fortunately, in the twentieth century, certain theologians influenced by the biblical renewal movement, underlined in strong terms the fact that Christian faith is characteristically eschatological. For example, in his

²⁵ Cf. Dermot A. Lane, "Eschatology" in J.A. Komonchak, M. Collins and D. A. Lane, eds. *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, p. 329-342.

²⁶ Lane, "Eschatology", p. 336.

Theology of Hope, Jürgen Moltmann noted that "The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith..."²⁷ It is not simply a part of faith but the foundation, centre and goal of every Christian proclamation and life. What this means is that hope in the final actualization of all things in Christ through the power of the Spirit of God is the mover of human life and responsible for the openness and direction of creation towards its destiny.

Though it is not always easy, Christianity holds together its eschatological hope with a deep solidarity with the world. It does not see the two aspects of her life as alternatives but rather her hope in the fulfillment of life in the future is lived out concretely by applying itself unreservedly to the promotion of the progress of the universe. It believes that the Incarnation makes this an imperative on her and teaches her that this is the only approved way for the realization of the eschatological hope which constitutes the destiny of the world. Christian faith is not simply built on a myth, an ideology or a principle but on a concrete person, Jesus Christ, who was born at a given time into a family and culture. Thus, Christians appreciate history deeply and take active part in its progress and development. The Church's understanding of the importance of history for its faith is expressed by the Second Vatican Council in these words

The joys and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joys and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community

²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (tr. J.W. Leitch), London: SCM Press, 1967, p. 16.

composed of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.²⁸

The deep solidarity of Christians with the human race and history gives clear evidence of the fact that Christianity is not solely an-other-worldly religion. Nigeria is a good example of a nation where the contribution of the Church to the development of society cannot be questioned or doubted. The coming of the Church to any given community is seen as the beginning of the development of the people and place. Before the year 1970, most schools were built and managed by missionaries and those who were trained in those institutions later became instrumental to the Independence of the nation. Through the hospitals built and managed built and managed by the Church, medical care and services came to be part of communities that erstwhile knew nothing of such amenities. The missionaries also provided potable water in the rural areas through boreholes and mono-pumps. In addition to these infrastructural developments, the Church went further to promote customs which enhanced human life and fought against those that exposed people to alienation, subordination and exploitation of human beings.

One would say that Africans already practice what Christianity teaches its adherents concerning the relationship between this world and the one that is to come. The faithful have to live in this world with their eyes open to the hope to which they are called at the end of their life. Wisdom and

²⁸ Second Vatican Council (1965), *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

foolishness are ascribed to individuals to the extent that they are able to respond to this call. Therefore, Christianity in Africa does not need to go so far outside its context to find resources, insights and illustration to teach its people about the teaching of the Church on eschatology. Africa should use its existing culture of urban life to teach its members about the kind of attitude required of them in their relationship with this world and the world to come.

4. Conclusion

Our examination of the African extended family system, the classificatory method of naming relationship and the structure and practice of urban life brings us to the conclusion that these elements of African culture provide a solid basis for understanding, communicating and living the Christian doctrines of the Church as communion, the communion of saints, eschatology and the practice of applying names and titles to persons in the family of God. From all indications, one would say that when the Bishops of Africa in the Special Synod for Africa, 1994, adopted the model of "the Church as the Family of God", their ideas were informed by the extended family system as an association of many nuclear families made of people usually related by bio-social ties and sharing certain values and property together. The extended family system provides Christianity in Africa a favourable experience for comprehending and appreciating the ecclesiology of communion. Given the place of the ancestors in the extended family, the Christian custom of fellowshiping with the departed members of our families through prayers and dedicating days to the celebration of their memorials is not foreign to the Church in Africa. The way names and titles are ascribed to persons in the Family of God also takes after the African method of naming

relationship in a classificatory manner. It is very flexible, dynamic and all-embracing. In the same way, the practice whereby the African, particularly the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, lives in the city or overseas and is earnestly committed to its development but yet considers himself as living outside his home, represents one of the best testimonies of Christian eschatology. The Christian is one who lives on earth, works for its integral growth and prays without ceasing for the Kingdom to come but does not in any way see the world as a permanent place of living. Home is heaven and life on earth is a preparation for it. In all, following the examples of the extended family system, the classificatory way of naming relationship and the structure and practice of urban life, the dialogue of culture and faith in Africa is destined to be a mutual process with hope of bringing about a formidable Christianity in the continent.