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A PROPOSED RITE FOR THE RENEWAL OF MARRIAGE VOWS: THE SPECTRUM OF IGBO-NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new rite for the renewal of marriage vows. The new rite is necessitated by the apparent conflicting rites adopted by several priests in the celebration of the joyful rite of renewal of marriage vows, within Igbo-Nigerian terrain. Granted that the Eucharistic liturgy allows for authentic liturgical inculturation, *ad hoc*, fire-brigade approach, haphazard, over dramatization and unwholesome words and gestures in the Eucharistic celebration are considered not only an aberration, falsification, and abuse, but also foreign to the classical liturgy of the universal and local Church. In the long run, they give an impression as if another Christian wedding has taken place. Using an expository, investigative, and analytic method, the paper argues that whether within Mass (*intra missam*) or outside Mass (*extra missam*), renewal of the marriage vows is one of such ways through which God's continual blessings and presence in the union is sought by the couple. Whenever the renewal is celebrated, the words and gestures of the ceremony must be explained very clearly and carried out in such manners not to duplicate wedding day; instead, it is a blessing of the already existing bond created by the original sacramental bond that is being celebrated.

Key words: Rite, Liturgy, Renewal, Mariage vows, Igbo-Nigeria, Pastoral.

Introduction

This study was borne out of the experience of the writer, filled with prophetic utterance and a challenge to pastors, liturgists, theologians and indeed, scholars across board in the spirit of the Synod on Synodality.¹ The renewal of priestly vows on Chrism Mass of 2022 at the *Corpus Christi* Cathedral, Port Harcourt, Nigeria was solemnly and prayerfully celebrated. After congratulating the writer, a man sent this WhatsApp message: “It is time the Catholic Church will also consider yearly renewal of marital vows for us the married couples. It can be done once a year where all Catholic married couples jointly renew their vows in the Church. Marriage, these days, needs so-much encouragement from the Church. If the family fails, the society fails. Happy priestly vows renewal my Spiritual Director.” Since then, I have been thinking in that regard. Unfortunately, there is no such rite for the renewal of marriage vows in the Igbo-Nigerian spectrum, giving rise to some priests trying to be creative by inventing novelties. Their aim is simply to impress and entertain the couple to make the Mass livelier.

¹ Pope Francis, on 10th October 2021, in Rome, solemnly opened the Synod on Synodality with the theme: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” The Synod is a two-year exercise of renewal and animation in the Church which will be concluded with the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 then, extended now to 2024 (see Pope Francis, “Vatican church world” in *Vatican News* from <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-10/pope-francis-discourse-moment-reflection-eve-inauguration-synod.html> accessed 10th October, 2023).

It is a truism that since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), one of the greatest challenges in reforming the liturgy is the urgent demand for furnishing the existing rites with not just suitable alternatives but creating entirely new ones.² This is because the Roman rite is not only the model intended for the entire world, but each local church can complement its deficiencies.³ Accordingly, the universal Church has not proposed any ritual for the renewal of the rite of Christian marriage either within or outside the Holy Mass. This is without prejudice to the second edition of *The Order of Christian Matrimony* (OCM), in its appendix three (nn. 272-286), titled: “The Order of Blessing a Married Couple within Mass on the Anniversary of Marriage.”⁴ Nonetheless, the Church offers great possibilities for the national episcopal conferences to prepare their own rites of renewal of marriage vows and submit them for

² Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) [henceforth SC] in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987) 37-40.

³ The Order of Celebrating Matrimony (English Translation According to the Second Typical Edition), 40; For more details on Adaptations of the Roman Ritual of Marriage, read OCM 39-44.

⁴ *The Roman Ritual, The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2018) nos. 272-286. It suggested ritual text for the 25th, 50th and 60th wedding anniversaries. However, it can be adapted for other anniversaries that are not those listed. The following form could be used if the couple “wish to renew their commitment publicly” (no. 272):

The husband: **“Blessed are you, Lord, for by your goodness I took N. as my wife.”**

The Wife: **“Blessed are you, Lord, for by your goodness I took N. as my husband.”**

Then both will say: **“Blessed are you, Lord, for in good and the bad times of our life you have stood lovingly by our side. Help us, we pray, to remain faithful in our love for one another, so that we may be true witnesses to the covenant you have made with mankind.”** (no. 272).

approval by the Holy See. Through this process, several countries have tapped into these provisions especially in North and South America where they have included Rites for Marriage, a Rite for the Renewal of Marriage Vows as it affects silver jubilee (25th) and golden jubilee (50th) anniversaries. These rites make a slight but significant distinction between the original vows and the renewal of the ongoing marriage commitment. In the United States of America (USA), the formula of vows is slightly different from the original formula. This is to reflect a spiritual renewal and reinvigoration. Whereas in Canada, it is the priest's introduction that explains the meaning and reasons for the renewal of the original formula. Different moments for the renewal of marriage vows abound. In some countries, the renewal on jubilee anniversaries is done after the homily while in others it follows the prayer after communion.

One can rightly say that there is no such rite as renewal of marriage vows since it is one of those sacraments received only once in life.⁵ The exchange of marriage vows is seen as the sacramental form and is thus unique for the same couple.⁶ Through their consent the spouses naturally give and accept each other through an irrevocable and perpetual covenant to establish marriage.⁷ Our discourse intends to propose a rite for renewal of

⁵ Others are the sacrament of baptism and holy orders.

⁶ Hence, in *The Roman Missal*, we have "On the Anniversaries of Marriage" (see *The Roman Missal Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II, English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011, 1080-1082).

⁷ Canon 1057 # 2) and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 1638.

marriage vows with the Igbo-Nigerian experience.⁸ The study has its theoretical framework on the principle that “What God has joined, let no man/woman put asunder” (Matt 19:6). The work ultimately creates an alternative rite, with options, for the renewal of marriage vows as a rich variety that promotes new and fresh interest for an enriched active participation in the marriage liturgy.⁹ The rite of renewal proposed, in this paper, contains elements of distinction to show that it is not the marriage vow itself that is being repeated or duplicated but a blessing, revitalization and reinvigoration of the already existing bond created by the original sacramental bond that is being celebrated. Hence, this study seeks to, in expounding the renewal of marriage vows on the couples, discover the possible proposed rite this reinvigoration of theologizing may learn from the effects the conferment of the sacrament of marriage brings about.

Rite in Perspective

By Rite, we mean religious custom or usage or ceremony. Etymologically, it is derived from a Latin word, *ritus*, meaning a ceremonial or formal, solemn act, observance, or procedure in accordance with prescribed rule or custom. It is the act of performing either a divine or solemn service, as established by

⁸ As a case study, this paper limits itself to the churches in Igbo land, Southeast of Nigeria. There are two ecclesiastical provinces in the Southeast, Nigeria, namely, Onitsha and Owerri province (s). The dioceses under Onitsha province include Onitsha Archdiocese, Abakaliki Diocese, Awgu Diocese, Awka Diocese, Ekwulobia Diocese, Enugu Diocese, Nsukka Diocese and Nnewi Diocese, while Owerri province has Owerri Archdiocese, Aba Diocese, Ahiara Diocese, Orlu Diocese, Okigwe Diocese and Umuahia Diocese.

⁹ SC 14.

laws, precepts, or customs. Rite in a wider sense is understood to express extensive ritual process, with various ceremonies that involve several rituals, for instance, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adult (RCIA) or Rite of Priestly Ordination. Lastly, it may be used in a comprehensive sense to designate the worship of a particular Church.¹⁰ For instance, the body of liturgy, theology, spirituality and discipline, culture, and circumstances of history of a distinct people practised in the Catholic Churches of both East and West, by which its own manner of living the faith is manifested in each Church. Our perspective, on the wider sense, which involves the process, decree, and norms to be used for marriage contract, is on rite for the renewal of marriage vows. The strength of the indissoluble bond created by the celebration of marriage makes it not to be dissolved.¹¹ The marriage contract cannot be dissolved by the contracting parties because God joined them. God alone can put them asunder. The Church does not even have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom. Nonetheless, the ongoing commitment of marriage is what is celebrated, and care should be expended to ensure that its distinction from the original vow comes out clearly. According to Edward McNamara, Catholics annually renew their baptismal promises on Easter Vigil Mass, priests their ordination commitments during Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday (or any other chosen day for the celebration due to pastoral reasons) and religious men and women their religious profession vows. But

¹⁰ Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins & Dermot A. Lane, *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996) 904.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1994) no. 1640.

these promises are complimentary to the sacrament and do not constitute the sacramental form itself. Nobody is ever baptized or ordained anew, but for devotional purposes.¹²

He further stated that this accounts why it is important that such renewal formulas be carefully framed and should avoid any expression that might suggest at the celebration of a new sacrament; instead, it is aimed at renewing the original sacramental bond. The same guideline and principle are applicable to the rite of marriage. This is because the actual formulas of the marriage vows are never repeated.¹³

Nature of Renewal of Christian Marriage Vows

It is certainly correct to agree with John Laux who rightly stated that there are three states in the Church to which a special sacredness abounds. They are the sacerdotal state, which is founded on the sacrament of Holy Orders; the religious state, which consists of those who have bound themselves by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience; and the marital state, to which all Christians belong who have been united in bound by the sacrament of marriage.¹⁴ Indeed, marriage is deeply central to the Catholic faith and theology. It is not only because it is one of the seven sacraments, but its fruit, the family constitutes the ‘first’

¹² Edward McNamara, Zenith.org/articles/why-no-renewal-of-wedding-vows/ accessed on 20th August 2023.

¹³ Edward McNamara, Zenith.org/articles/why-no-renewal-of-wedding-vows/ accessed on 20th August 2023.

¹⁴ John Laux, *Mass and the Sacraments: The Mass, Seven Sacraments, Indulgences, Sacraments*, (Rockford: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1990) 129.

Church, the domestic Church. It remains the cradle of faith and the catalyst for various Christian vocations. Ideally, Christian marriage is celebrated within the Eucharistic liturgy. Equally, there is the provision made for the possible celebration of the marriage rite without the Eucharistic liturgy. This is a very important point to note. Bernard Cooke rightly avers:

Even if joined to the celebration of the Eucharist, the liturgical ritual of the wedding celebration should be clearly seen as a distinct sacramental rite. As such it needs not require celebration of the Eucharist, though circumstances might indicate that this is appropriate. For example, if most of those gathered for the wedding understand the intrinsic link between marriage and Eucharist, sharing in the Eucharist would be seen as a distinctive celebration of the new marriage.¹⁵

Pointedly, Christian marriage is the union contracted between a baptized man and a baptized woman. The two come together in mutual understanding and love to give themselves to each other for the whole of their lives. Christian marriage is for the purpose of love for procreation and raising up of children according to the law of God and the Church for the good of the couple, but also the society. The Church has a very clear notion of marriage: an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children. She calls “marriage” only such a union. Other forms, types and kinds of

¹⁵ Bernard J. Cooke (ed.) *Alternative Futures for Worship Vol. 5 Christian Marriage*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1987) 41.

marriage do so only “in a partial and analogous way.”¹⁶ Hence, they cannot be strictly called “marriage” in the strict sense.

The publication of the *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* in 1969 and a second edition in 1991, was greeted with a warm welcome. At the centre of any Christian marriage are the marriage vows (exchange of consent). Marriage vows are the promises made by the couple to make their intentions known to each other. Through these vows, the couple promise each other unalloyed love and fidelity. The couple promise to stay by the side of each other in whatever may come, and in whatever situation they find themselves. Through these vows, the couple promise each other how they intend to keep the path of life together, and how to take over the duties and responsibilities that go along with marriage. An example of a typical Christian marriage vow looks like this, which the bridegroom begins it:

I, N.N., take you, N.N., to be my wife, I promise to be faithful to you, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and to honour all the days of my life.¹⁷

Then the bride repeats the same wordings as above and the priest receives their consent by saying: “May the Lord in his kindness strengthen the consent you have declared before the Church, and graciously bring to fulfilment his blessing within you. What God joins together, let no one put asunder.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), Apostolic Exhortation (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2016) 292.

¹⁷ *The Roman Ritual, The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* 50.

¹⁸ *The Roman Ritual, The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* 64.

Christian renewal of marriage vows, on the other hand, is an occasion on which the couple remembers the very first day they were married. They recall the joyful celebration of their anniversaries. The goal of renewal is to help the couple to be more committed in their chosen vocation. Here, the couple commemorates and celebrates the love of each other which they took vows to stay and stick to each other many years ago (depending on how long they have stayed). Renewal of marriage vows is not a second wedding or duplication of the first wedding. It is an occasion whereby the couple remembers the first time they enter the marriage contract with the sole purpose of rededicating and reaffirming themselves to this love which they started with sometime back.

A Proposed Rite of Renewal of Marriage Vows

To complement what we have in *The Order of Christian Matrimony* (OCM), titled: “The Order of Blessing a Married Couple within Mass on the Anniversary of Marriage,”¹⁹ the following alternative rites of Renewal of Marriage Vows are proposed for study, celebration and open to enrichment with the cultural values and genius of Igbo-Nigerian people.²⁰ It may be

¹⁹ *The Roman Ritual, The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* nos. 272-286.

²⁰ The writer is aware that official Church’s documents explained the principles and procedures for inculturation in the Roman liturgy especially in SC 37-40. Among other things, it means that a detailed prior project to be forwarded to the Apostolic See for authorization, after the period of experimentation. The Episcopal Conference makes a mature proposal to the Apostolic See for its decision. Before new adaptations, proper instructions and catechesis would, however, be given to the clergy and the faithful. The caveat is that liturgical reform is only when it is necessary and must flow into the already existing forms. Liturgical inculturation requires a necessary amount of

used within Mass (*intra missam*) or outside Mass (*extra missam*) especially where most liturgical activities were celebrated at home²¹ or outside the context of Mass in the home of the couple. Like a typical Igbo-Nigerian cultural setting, the arena is arranged in a semi-circular form so that the participants can sit facing each other like a family.²² Tables are set in the centre where the meal

time to sow the seed and for it to germinate. Efforts at inculturation are not just to create new rites but to respond to the needs of a given culture in such a manner that adaptations are not at variance with the Roman rite.

²¹ Among people where the marriage ceremonies customarily take place in the home, sometimes over a period of several days, their customs should be adapted to the Christian spirit and to the liturgy. In such cases, the Conference of Bishops, according to the pastoral needs of the people, may allow the sacramental rite to be celebrated in the home (see Sacred Congregation of Rites, Decree no. 17-18 in *The Rites, Vol. 1*, Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 724).

²² The Igbo-Nigerian people are family-oriented. The eucharistic assembly shares a great similarity with the Igbo kingship structure. Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, extended family members, relations, indeed, entire community come together for worship and celebrations. The special feature of Igbo traditional community is both communitarian and egalitarian. Individuals have well-defined rights and duties within the assembly. The Igbo assembly is presided over by an *Okpara* (the eldest man) who is conferred with the sovereignty but is enlarged and exercised within the Igbo values of family, solidarity, and communal sense of living, thus involving the active participation of the people. Therefore, the African (Igbo) assembly is not something new. Catechesis to the gathered families in worship as one family is not altogether strange for the people. Hence, the eucharistic assembly means the gathering of the children of God, to give thanks through Jesus Christ for the mystery of salvation, the attitude that existed long ago among the people of Africa (Igbo) who always gather in thanksgiving for the mystery of creation and sustenance. This cultural value and genius can inform and form the assembly, so that everybody is carried along in the process of the renewal of marriage celebration. We cannot confuse this model, however, with anarchy or an un-organized gathering since there is an internal mechanism through which much accent is given to the role of the people. The sense of the community and family forms the basis for the placement of active participation for the rite of renewal of marriage vows (For a detailed study, see Emmanuel

is placed. A central table is also set with a standing crucifix and lighted candles on which the Bible, renewal marriage certificate and holy water are placed. The couple dressed in traditional attire, with other family members and friends invited, await the arrival of the priest in cassock, surplice and stole, made with the festive colour (white/gold). If outside Mass, a master of ceremony is also present. The Rite is divided into four parts:

1. Introduction Rites
2. Liturgy of the Word
3. Rite of Renewal of Marriage Vows
4. Concluding Rites

Ritual Text of the Proposed Rite for the Renewal of Marriage Vows (Option One)

Accordingly, the oration²³ of the Structure of the Rite of Renewal of Marriage Vows are:

Chinedu Anagwo, *Active Participation in the Eucharistic Celebration*, Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 2013, 94).

²³ By oration we mean prayers offered at the Eucharistic liturgy when there are specific needs and occasions in the life of the faithful. And Masses for Various Needs have been in the liturgy from the beginning of the Roman liturgy. These orations used include: the needs of the Church, human beings, and the world with the Eucharistic celebration as the centre of the entire work of redemption. Through these Masses, connection is made between liturgy and life, heaven and earth, the divine and the human, the spiritual and the material, the interior and the exterior, the religion and the society. The Third Typical Edition of 2002 *Roman Missal* maintains that every event in life is sanctified by the divine grace which flows from the Paschal Mystery and because the Eucharist is the sacrament of sacraments, *The Roman Missal* provides examples of Mass *formularies* for the needs of the Church, whether universal or local.

- i. **Calling of the Couple(s):** If it is celebrated within Mass then after the homily the couple may be called to come forward in front of the sanctuary. However, if it is outside of Mass there should be introduction and opening prayer. In the liturgy of the Word, the scriptural reading may be taken either from the Lectionary For the Celebration of Marriage (see nos-179-222), or from the Mass For Giving Thanks to God from the Lectionary for Masses for Various Needs (cf. *The Roman Missal, Lectionary for Mass*, nos. 943-947) in accord with the norm of the rubrics, before the couple (s) are invited to make the renewal of marriage vows.
- ii. **Short Address:** At this point, the presider should ensure that the rite of celebration is explained and its distinctiveness from the original vow clearly spelt out to enhance better understanding and appreciation of the celebration at hand.
- iii. **Invitation to Join Hands and Renew Vows:** The presider then says or uses similar words: “Friends in Christ, we are gathered here before God to give him thanks for His blessings upon the marriage of this couple who today reaffirm their marriage vows. On your wedding day you freely pledged your love for each other, and you have proven your devotion to each other by your life together. Join hands now and renew your consent before God and his Church.”
- iv. **Renewal of Vows Proper:** With hands joined the couple say: “We renew our promise to love and respect each other for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. (*If the union*

has been blessed with children they may add), we also pledge to love and support our children and to share with them all that we know and value.

- v. **General Intercessions:** Prayers will then be said for the intentions of the couple, the church, and the world. At the end of which if it is within Mass, it will be time for offertory but if it is outside of Mass then there will be a concluding prayer and final blessings on the couple and those present and the assembly shall then dismiss in peace.

Ritual Text of the Proposed Rite for the Renewal of Marriage Vows (Option Two)

The oration of the second option reads thus:

“The priest invites the couple.”

“The jubilarians will come out before the Altar rail after homily on the invitation of the presiding parish priest/or who is delegated to stand in for him, joining their right hands together, they will face each other in the presence of the priest and the congregation gathered. They will repeat after the priest. The man first says:

“I, N,N., fully aware of the dignity and duties of my marital status reaffirm today before the whole people of God gathered here my marriage vows of (mention the number of years of renewal) years ago (looking directly into the eyes of his or her spouse he or she continues to say), I consciously rededicate myself in the same spirit without any compulsion that I once took you, N,N., as my spouse according to the mind of Christ and of his Church, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. I reaffirm that I will daily, with the grace of

God, manifest in my life that conjugal love which makes marriage a permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on Calvary.

The woman next repeats the same formula, as it applies to her. Facing the priest who is standing on the altar, the couple will kneel if they are able to do so. If for health reasons, they are not able, they will be permitted to stand. The priest in the name of the Church will accept their renewal and extending his two hands over them, he prays over them as he says:

“You have reaffirmed and rededicated yourselves to each other before God and his Church. May God who in his infinite mercy and love for mankind deemed it necessary to institute the union of a man and a woman from creation be gracious to you. May Christ who raised this union into a sacrament by his sacrificial love and made it a symbol of the love existing between him and his church look with mercy upon you all and constantly grant you that fidelity required by him for your marital state. May you be encouraged to look up to the example of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and be strengthened especially in times of temptations and difficulties, so that in your daily lives as husband (s) and wife (wives), your conjugal love will be made manifest in each other (*If the union has been blessed with children they may add*), and your children continue to be a perpetual evidence of this love and sharers in it.”

When the priest concludes the prayer, the couple goes back to their seats and the Mass continues. With this blessing of the priest on the couple, their marriage vow has been renewed. They are

expected to receive Holy Communion (both species) in the Mass to continually draw strength from the Eucharistic Lord needed to fulfil the demands of their marital status.”

Ritual Text of the Proposed Rite for the Renewal of Marriage Vows (Option Three)

The oration of the third option can be a clue adapted from an English language ritual used in the 1960’s Renewal of Marriage Vows.²⁴ The jubilarians join their right hands and repeat after the priest, beginning with the man:

“I, N.N., reaffirm my marriage vows of (twenty five, fifty years, etc) years ago, and rededicate myself in the same spirit that I once took you, N.N., for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” Next, the woman repeats the same formula as applied to her. The priest accepts the renewal of their marriage vows (consent) on behalf of the Church as the official witness of the Church. Theological foundation for the renewal of commitment to marital life abound.

Theological Basis for Renewal of Marital Vows

One of the major landmarks of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council was to ensure that the rites of the sacraments; that is, how they are celebrated at worship, communicate as much as possible to those who are celebrating it, the graces which the sacraments

²⁴ “Renewal of Marriage Vows” in <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/renewal-of-marriage-vows--4665> accessed on 10th October 2023.

bestow, the obligations they entail, and functions they serve in the mission of the Church. The rites were to be reformed also, so that “they express more clearly the holy things which they signify.”²⁵ The Church understands marriage as a sign of the union that exists between Christ and the Church. Like all the members of the Body of Christ, the Church form a bond through baptism, husband and wife form a bond that signifies to all the union of Christ, the groom, to his church, the bride. As all members of the body of Christ assist each other in growth in holiness; similarly, husband and wife help each other or are at the service of each other to attain holiness in their married life as well as through their rearing and education of their children. This is considered their vocation within the body of Christ, just like the ordained ministry (bishop, priest, and deacon) is a vocation too, within the body of Christ. They are, therefore, to be at the avant-garde of service of communion.

Christian marriage is a way moving towards perfection to God. Christian family as the primary cell of the Church has been noted and declared by the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution that states: Christian spouses, in virtue of the Sacrament of Matrimony by which they signify and share (Eph 5:32), the mystery of the unity and faithful love between Christ and the Church, Christian married couples help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in the rearing of their children.²⁶ The union of husband and wife is indeed the seminary

²⁵ SC 21.

²⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) in Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987) 11.

of humanity divinely designed to replenish and flourish human living on earth. It is important not only to marry but to multiple and conquer the earth according to the laid down precepts and saving plan by God. As Christ is chastely united to the Church by sacrificial love, Christian marriage should wholesomely replicate Christ's love for humanity. Adam was the one husband of Eve just as Eve was his one wife or woman married to Adam as one husband before polygamy (a man having multiple wives) and polyandry (a woman having multiple husbands) came into human knowledge. Christian marriage strictly observes this divine initiative and models Christ's sacrificial love to his Bride, the Church as a sanctifying institution. Therefore, the Church's teaching forbids pressure for prosperity, childbearing and sex excuses, violating and desecrating the sacred purpose of Christian marriage as the spring bud of the family or the Church. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, St. Pope John Paul II rightly states:

Thus, the Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant, will manifest to all people the Saviour's living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church. The family lives by the mutual love of the spouses, by loving way in which all the members of the family work together.²⁷

Theologically, the transformation that occurs in the couple at renewal is one that empowers the spouses to carry out ministry of

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (The Christian Family in the Modern World), (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1981) no.50.

service in the family, the Church, and the world at large. They are called and set apart to be instruments of dispensing God's life, grace, favours, blessings, and genuine care for their household. Through their renewal, they become beneficiaries as well as dispensers of the fruits of sacramental bond. In this light, the renewal of marriage vows stands out. By this renewal which may be annual, seasonal, occasional, they are called to lead and serve in their families, by tending, feeding, and sanctifying them. Their life becomes a sacrifice for the good of all. Despite the vicissitudes of life, one cannot but be captivated by the effects of the responsibility and call to service to couple. They serve as a catalyst, prompting one to examine the implications of renewal of marriage vows in Igbo-Nigerian context.

Implications for Pastoral Resonance

The pastoral rationale for this proposed rite is to respond to the demands of the reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council that asked for the revision and enrichment of the existing rite.²⁸ Accordingly, the general principles enunciated in the Constitution on the reformed Liturgy would be shared in the light of the Synod on Synodality. For example, the Conciliar Fathers promoted reform that would contribute to “that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy.”²⁹ Among the reforms called for were “the participation of the people by means of acclamations, responses, antiphons, and songs, as well as by

²⁸ SC 77, 78.

²⁹ SC 14.

actions, gestures, bodily attitude, and reverent silence”³⁰; rites characterized by a “noble simplicity,” avoiding “useless repetition”³¹; “richer fare...at the table of the Word”³² in terms of Scripture readings; sermons based on the readings³³; restoration of the intercessions of the people; and use of the mother tongue.³⁴

Again, the above compositions are primarily intended for academic study, pastoral experimentation, critique, and eventual adoption as forms of a public prayer of the Church. In his celebrated four-volume treatise titled: *The Church at Prayer*, Aime G. Martimort asserts that the Church is always at prayer in her various ministrations, ranging from the celebration of sacraments to sacramentals. Accordingly, couples should be able to read the renewal text, and even more, to discover the meaning of the rites by participating in them.³⁵ This is because by meditating on the texts and by participating as fervently as possible in the liturgical celebration, they will be able to enter with understanding into the mysteries of the praying Church where Christ himself is present and active. In such situations their faith is ably manifested and captured by an outstanding liturgical principle which opines the intimate relationship between the *lex orandi* (the law of prayer) and the *lex credendi* (the law of believing). Admittedly, it is extended to the *lex vivendi* (the law of living). This gave rise to the slogan of what the Church

³⁰ SC 30.

³¹ SC 34.

³² SC 51.

³³ SC 35.2.

³⁴ SC 36.2.

³⁵ Aime G. Martimort, *The Church at Prayer, Volumes 1-4* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1987).

believes and popularized by Prosper of Aquitaine. It reads: “*lex credendi, lex celebrandi, lex vivendi*” (what the Church believes, she celebrates, and she lives out). After all, the Constitution on the reformed liturgy allows each conference of bishops to draw up its own marriage rite suited to the usages of the place and people and approved by the Apostolic See.³⁶ A necessary condition, however, is that, in the rite, the priest assisting, as the official witness of the Church, at such marriages must ask for and receive the consent of the contracting parties, and the nuptial blessing should *always* be given.

Admittedly, Christian marriage once validly contracted has a permanent and indissoluble bond. However, just as other sacraments such as baptism, ordination, and religious profession (deepening of baptismal commitment) such as annual renewal of religious profession, etc are renewed yearly as a sign of reminder as well as asking for continual graces from God, so too are marriage vows renewed to continue to ask for more blessings on the already celebrated sacraments. Therefore, the celebration of the rite of renewal of marriage vows must be done in such a way that nobody will mistake it to mean the marriage vows being re-contracted but should reflect that it is a renewal of what has already been done before. As a pastoral strategy, marriage renewal certificate can be issued to the couple by the priest-celebrant, as the official witness of the Church. Many families, no doubt, will cherish the certificate given for the renewal of marital vows as an important document which they often frame and hang on the parlour wall of the house.

³⁶ The Constitution on the Liturgy devoted two articles to the reform of the rites of marriage (articles 77, 78).

Against the argument of those who may think that there should be no blessing of rings and exchange of consent to forestall anyone feeling the marriage is being celebrated anew, the writer thinks that they should take place. Elsewhere, the writer argues that the ring is a round object; hence, it is the sign for bond. The most intimate bond which man can enter into is marriage. In wedding the couple say to each other: “Wear this ring as a sign of your fidelity!” Since the circle is a line without an end, the ring, therefore, on account of its being a perfect circle, is the sign for unbreakable fidelity.³⁷ This is also in *tandem* with *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* (OCM) which provides prayer for the blessing of the rings of their wedding day, after which the rings may be incensed. It also provides for the blessing of new rings if new ones are provided.³⁸

It is the candid view of the writer that in the quest to promote the spirit of the liturgy, the rite for the renewal of marriage vows must be celebrated with a great sense of simplicity, decorum and in view of fine details, vigour, candour, and aesthetics.³⁹ On spot creativity or innovation, mechanical and arid worship edifies no one. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* put it right when they said:

³⁷ For a detailed study, see Emmanuel C. Anagwo, “A Nigerian Perspective on Wedding Ring in the Rite of Christian Marriage” in *African Christian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Dec 2015, 7-23.

³⁸ The Order of Celebrating Matrimony (OCM) no. 279.

³⁹ See Emmanuel C. Anagwo, “Christian Wedding and the Challenge of Liturgical Decorum in Nigeria” in *Koinonia*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Dec 2015, 115-130.

Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is realized than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it.⁴⁰

Therefore, the priest-celebrant during the renewal of marriage vows should emphasize the intrinsic value of the renewal, reaffirmation, rededication, and re-invigoration of their commitment. Catechesis before, during and after that ceremonial day on the importance of such renewal of marriage vow and exchange of new rings can take care of mistrust, misgiving and ignorance. Besides, the readings at the Mass and the homily should be tailored towards bringing out the theology and spirituality of Christian marriage and encouraging the couple to continue to draw strength and inspiration from Christ who never gave up on us.

By implication, the rite of renewal of marriage vows shows they are annually done especially at milestone numbers such as the silver, golden, diamond jubilee of marriage. They may take place on the same date or the following year or another suitable date. This is because marriage is an institution that needs serious presence of God for it to succeed. The couple must constantly seek the blessings and graces of God for more strength and perseverance to remain faithful to the demands of marriage covenant. Additionally, since the Church officially celebrates the renewal of baptism at Easter and the renewal of ordination on

⁴⁰ SC 11.

Holy Thursday, a suitable feast day within the year should also be fixed for the celebration of the rite of renewal of marriage each year. Evidently, in some parishes in Nigeria, 14th February every year has become popularly acclaimed day for celebration of love (Valentine's Day). Alternatively, feast of Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, during Christmas season, can suffice for such a memorable occasion. They use such day in their parish community for the celebration of marriage and the renewal of marriage vows. All wedded couples sit together and after the homily within the Holy Mass, they will hold lighted candles (one for the husband and wife to hold together) and would recite a short formula of renewal. Here, they thank God for the journey so far and ask for strength to persevere till the end. After that there will be prayer of the faithful. Then they will be sprinkled with holy water and the Mass will continue as usual. During communion, the couples receive communion under both species. After Mass there may be a small get-together before they dismiss.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the liturgical life of the Church is constantly evolving since she believes that "*liturgia semper reformanda est*" (liturgy is always in need of reformation). At all times, the Church responds and reacts to history and signs of the time. Accordingly, this paper, as a proposed rite, considers it proper and necessary to give renewal of marriage vows and anniversaries such priority because the foundation of Christian family is rooted in it. The family constitutes the 'first' Church, the domestic Church. Thus, in whatever situation the Christian wedding is celebrated and renewed, the rite must indicate that

Christian marriage is celebrated once and not duplicated. We can affirm that marriage, as a vocation, is very noble and challenging to the recipients. Christian theology believes that the presence of God's blessing in the marriage enables the couple to cope with their marital challenges, pledging to love and honour each other for the rest of their lives. Renewal of their marriage vows is one of such ways through which God's continual blessings and presence in the union is sought by the couple. Nonetheless, when the renewal is celebrated, the words and gestures of the ceremony must be explained very clearly and carried out in such manners not to suggest that anything new is happening; instead, it is a liturgical action aimed at thanking and seeking blessings from God in an already existing union for the mutual love of the spouses and the increase of humanity.